



Loose Id

Sedonia Quillone

Between Two Captains

Praise for the writing of Sedonia Guillone

Manwich

This book was a beautiful and wonderfully moving story. The love between the three is expressed in a richly emotional way.

-- Regina, *Coffee Time Romance*

The powerfully passionate lust the characters feel towards each other only enhance the storyline and make the story that much more believable. Ms. Guillone's well-written story shows the bond between brothers and how that bond can grow and expand when they fall in love with one woman.

-- Ophelia, *Erotic Escapades*

These are sensitive, strong men who long for a good, caring woman who will love them both. This story will warm your heart and have you fanning yourself at the same time.

-- Holly, *Euro Reviews*

I assure you that you'll feel rewarded at the poignance and healing that this oftentimes surprising and funny plot puts forth, even as you're aroused beyond imagining at the sultry scenes. *Manwich* is a delightful feast for the senses, and you'll truly love this too-hot-to-handle tale!

-- Michelle, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

Ms. Guillone does an amazing job bringing out the emotional aspect of her characters. Situations that could have been strictly sexual, become emotionally stimulating and will leave readers sighing.

-- Chrissy Dionne, *Romance Junkies*

Manwich is now available from Loose Id.

BETWEEN TWO CAPTAINS

Sedonia Guillone

LooseId
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This book contains substantial explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (ménage).

Between Two Captains

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Dedication

For Mitch, the love of my heart and the guide of my spirit.

Thank yous: Thank you to my sweet, wonderful editor, Ansley. To all the friends who love and support me. To Treva, Allie, MT, and Doreen for having me here at Loose Id. To Skyewolf for another awesome cover. To Ruth Axtell Morren, my critique partner, who helps my writing more each time and who showed me where to find the intimate details of Victorian London. I couldn't have done this without any of you.

Author's Note

Dear Reader,

I hope you will enjoy Between Two Captains, the story of Violette and her erotically delicious, steamy and passionate romance with two scrumptious Englishmen. If you have read Manwich (also available at Loose Id), you already know that Between Two Captains was begun by Valerie Martin, and finished by Kayla Morgan, after she did her “research” on the subject of making love with two men at once. However, both writers have given me their permission to present the final version of Between Two Captains, with, of course, my own personal flourishes. Many of the scenarios and dialogues have evolved since its presentation in Manwich. Both Valerie and Kayla have also graciously allowed me to use my name on the cover.

All the best, Sedonia

Chapter One

Carrick Manor, Surrey, England, 1864

“Are you certain I can’t convince you to come with me?” Ethan Carrick watched his brother study a canvas he’d just finished.

Charles lifted his dark blond head and looked up. “I wish you wouldn’t mock me, Ethan.” He backed up his chair a few feet, turned, and wheeled over to where Ethan stood in the doorway of the studio.

Behind Charles, the large bay windows showed the late afternoon sun glinting off of Carrick Manor’s perfectly manicured lawns. “Need I remind you that you’re going to a *ball*? People *dance* at a *ball*. Women want to be waltzed romantically across the floor. They don’t want ...” He trailed off and shook his head. “Forgive me. I promised myself I wouldn’t fall into self-pity. I’m grateful for your concern.”

Ethan sighed. Charles’s still palpable grief filled the space between them. Sarita, Charles’s beautiful Indian wife, had been murdered by a fellow British officer during the Mutiny of ’57. Though his brother’s grief was still raw, Ethan always hoped his brother would find love again to heal the wounds. “I’m sorry. I so much want you to find someone.

But you never will meet her if you stay holed up in your studio like a hermit. The doctor has said repeatedly that you will walk again.” He watched Charles’s expression, feeling the concern for his younger brother that increased with each passing day.

Even though Charles’s injury had been from saving the lives of women and children in India during the Mutiny, the fact that Queen Victoria had knighted him for his valor in service to the Crown was not helping to lift his morale.

Unfortunately, Charles seemed to feel that *all* women would not want to be burdened by a man in a wheelchair, even if the situation was only temporary. Ethan knew his brother told himself that so he would never have to risk enduring more grief than he already had. Instead, painting had become his life.

“Besides,” Ethan added when Charles didn’t answer. “It’s not a ball. It’s an engagement party.”

Charles lifted an eyebrow. “I thought you disliked Martin Poole.”

“I do. But his mother was very good to ours in their day, and I feel obligated. In any case, the party is not for him. It’s for his daughter, Violette. It will be interesting to see the girl he’s been hiding all these years.”

Charles nodded. “Yes, you mentioned her. She’s been living in France?”

“Yes. Her mother was Sandrine Maynard. She passed away about a year ago.”

Charles’s eyebrows shot up. “*The* Sandrine Maynard? The actress Mother and Father adored?”

“That’s the one.”

A mischievous gleam shone in Charles’s blue eyes. “Interesting! If the daughter looks anything like the mother, no wonder you want to see her. Who’s the lucky groom?”

“Richard, Lord Graves. The engagement was only announced a little over a week ago.”

Charlie's eyes widened, and his lips curled as if he'd been given rat poison. "Graves? Are you joking? The poor girl!" The blue of his eyes darkened and a shadow passed over his features.

Ethan leaned on the doorpost, watching the cloud of grief pass over his brother's face. "I agree. The whole situation smells a bit rotten to me. Violette's been living in France for all twenty-four years of her life. I don't think Martin's seen her four times. And then, suddenly, she's engaged to ... Graves." Graves had been a strong supporter of the annexation of Oudh, a political move that had fueled the bloodbath of the Indian Mutiny. As far as Ethan was concerned, Graves was one of the players directly responsible for Charles's injuries and losses.

The mention of Graves and all the implications reminded Ethan of his own guilt. He, too, had served in India, and had fought in the Mutiny. He, however, had come out unscathed. If he and Charles had not been such close friends, their relationship would also have been lost from this added bitterness. He sighed. "I apologize, Charlie. I was terribly insensitive even to suggest that you come."

Charles raked a hand through his hair. "It's all right. I suppose I'll have to face life again at some point." Charles leaned back in the chair, rubbing his chin. "At least I'm not the poor waif who has to bed the man. If I had a daughter whom I cared deeply about, I certainly wouldn't want her engaged to Graves. The mere thought makes me shudder."

Ethan sighed again. "I've never had the impression that Poole cares deeply for his daughter. Facing a firing squad would be preferable to facing Graves."

Charlie laughed, a bit ruefully. "Well, perhaps Graves will get what he deserves and Martin's daughter will have a giant wart on her nose and a penchant for boiling cauldrons, spells and frogs." His laughter then took on a lighter tone.

Ethan joined his brother's mirth. "One can only hope."

When their laughter had passed, Ethan stood away from the doorpost. “Seriously, though, Charlie, I want to see you happy.”

Charlie looked up at him with a meaningful expression. “I’ve wished the same for you many times. You want me to love a woman again and yet, you are as much a hermit as I. Don’t you want to find someone?”

Ethan took a deep breath. On this matter, he was as vulnerable as his brother. There hadn’t been someone for him since that first woman. Elizabeth had intoxicated him with her beauty and sweetness. They’d been each other’s first love, and lover. Unfortunately, she’d been an unhappy girl and as soon as he’d been shipped to India for his service, Ellie had found she just couldn’t be alone, not even for a day. The last gossip Ethan had caught wind of had reported that Ellie had been married several times since she’d left him and had gone to America with her most recent husband.

“All right, Charles. Touché.” He held out his hand. “I’ll be back in a couple of days. I’m going to meet with my solicitor while I’m in London. If you need anything, I’ll be staying at the club.”

Charlie shook his hand, and a wave of mutual brotherly affection passed between them. “Thanks, Ethan, but I can’t think of anything I need, except for perhaps a beautiful model. I’ve yet to try my hand at a nude. I’m sick to death of still lifes and landscapes.”

Ethan smiled. “I’ll see what I can do. In the meantime, Sir Charles, take care of yourself, and get some fresh air.”

* * * * *

Mayfair, London

The maid yanked the corset strings.

Violette sucked in her breath. She pushed back her tears, not from the pressure of the corset, but from her utterly horrifying plight.

She stared at her reflection in the mirror, watching the maid behind her work the laces into a tight bow. On the outside, she appeared to be calmly going through the preparations for her engagement party, sham that it was, while internally, her mind raced through her escape plan.

Her heart ached for *Maman*. Had she been alive, she would never have let Father get away with this. He'd lured her here with promises of a London season and the father-daughter relationship they'd never had, only to introduce her to her fiancé on her very first night!

Perhaps not all men were to be distrusted, but Martin Poole was. Of course, he would never tell her his true reasons for promising his only daughter to that cruel-looking man, Lord Graves, but there was no doubt in her mind that he had done so to save his own skin.

She should have suspected him from the very first. He had never taken an active interest in her life. He'd only married her mother after getting her pregnant because his own parents demanded it of him. According to *Maman*, her in-laws would rather she come into society as his legitimate wife than to risk a public scandal should the gossip get out that Martin Poole had an illegitimate child by a French actress.

Violette had allowed her grief and her deep desire for a father to cloud her judgment and had made the journey to England.

The maid helped her into her petticoats and fastened them. She then went to the garderobe and pulled out the gown Martin Poole had had made especially for the engagement party. Looking at the cream colored crinoline and taffeta with embroidered roses did not lift her mood, knowing that the dress was for an engagement she was being forced into. She had always wanted to marry for love. She wanted to choose the man with whom she would share her body in the most intimate way.

As the maid latched the hooks on her bodice, Violette's determination to escape strengthened. She would go through with this party. She would even dance with her fiancé and pretend to like him.

However, tucked away in the depths of her garderobe was her satchel, all packed. Above it hung the nondescript dress and hooded cloak she would wear.

Come sunrise tomorrow morning, she'd be gone.

* * * * *

As soon as he stepped down from the cab, Ethan could hear the waltz music drifting from the well-lit ballroom of the dance hall. He mounted the wide front steps, his dislike of big parties, especially ones attended by Martin Poole and Graves, welling up the closer he got to the front doors. How he wished for the camaraderie of his brother at a time like this, even though he could well understand Charlie's desire to remain cloistered away.

Not terribly long ago, Charlie had been one of those uniformed rakes twirling one of many dance partners across the smooth wooden floors. And then during his time in India, he'd fallen madly in love with Sarita and taken her for a wife. Of course, the Crown had never recognized the marriage, but Charlie had never wavered from his love for the beautiful *hourî*. How could he feel anything but the agony of his past in such a setting as this?

Ethan handed his card to the greeter. When his arrival had been announced, he turned his attention to the receiving line and sighed.

Martin Poole stood at the head of the line. He was his usual red-faced self, appearing like the tuxedoed penguin he always did at such functions. Graves was next to him, an imposing man with steel gray hair and aristocratic features. One would have to get past those shark-like eyes to truly find him human.

Ethan took a step toward them. He looked past Graves to the young woman standing next to him. He sucked in his breath, his gaze suddenly captured by the glint of chandelier light off of the most gloriously red hair he'd ever seen.

She was in the middle of shaking hands with Bertrice Esterhazy, a wealthy dowager who then released the girl's hand and moved on.

His gaze followed the graceful coil of curls and tresses downward to a face of pale skin and soft features. Full pink lips and high cheekbones filled the center of her heart-shaped face. *My God*. Violette Poole was nothing short of enchanting.

At the last second, he remembered to keep walking, lest he appear rude.

"Ethan, old boy, good to see you." Martin Poole smiled at him from his red face above the black and white of his tuxedo.

"Hello, Martin." Ethan accepted his handshake, suppressing his wicked need to stare at Martin's daughter. "Good to see you." The words tumbled out automatically. Martin was old enough to be his elder brother by ten years, and their mothers had been dear friends. Clarice Poole had been an engaging and handsome woman, yet had somehow failed to pass these qualities on to her son. Ethan had often wondered what qualities Martin did possess that had charmed Sandrine Maynard into his bed.

There was no wondering, however, about Clarice's granddaughter.

"You know Lord Graves, of course." Martin's voice brought Ethan back to the present.

Ethan looked at him, suppressing a shudder. He shook Graves's hand as briefly as possible. "Yes, of course. We've met."

Poole cleared his throat. "And this is my daughter, Violette. Violette, Captain Ethan Carrick."

Ethan looked at her. To his surprise, he caught the young woman staring at him.

A gentle blush of pink stole into her ivory skin, which he noticed had a delicate showering of freckles. Her full lips curved into a shy smile. Her greenish-blue eyes widened for just a moment, showing in their depths that same intoxicating mixture of sensuality and innocence that had swallowed his heart when he'd met Ellie. Thank God this woman was

marrying someone else. If she hadn't been, he could see himself getting into all kinds of mischief ...

The look of wonderment in her face vanished as quickly as it had appeared, and she held out a gloved hand. "I'm very pleased to meet you, Captain Carrick." Her voice was soft, her accent an intriguing blend of English and French. "My father speaks very highly of you."

Ethan accepted her hand and shook it gently. He wanted to turn it over and kiss it but did not trust himself. The spiral of heat tightening his groin would cause his lips to linger on her hand. Apparently, he was still fully capable of falling for such beauty, no matter what he told himself. "Congratulations on your forthcoming marriage."

Her smile widened. "Thank you, Captain." She glanced up at Graves. "I look forward to my future as well."

Ethan released Miss Poole's hand, working to keep his jaw from dropping. Had he heard correctly? Was this beautiful creature actually glad about her engagement? Perhaps his initial impression of her wide-eyed innocence had been merely an apparition, something he'd wanted to see. In spite of the speculation he and Charlie had engaged in earlier that day, the possibility existed that Violette Poole was as much of an opportunistic lowlife as her father.

His immediate disappointment was followed by sharp relief, as if a weight had lifted off of him. He no longer had to worry that some innocent child was being fed to the wolves. She seemed quite happy about her fate. Perhaps even ecstatic, although he couldn't imagine how.

He smiled and bowed politely. Thankfully, the next person in the receiving line approached, taking Miss Poole's attention. Across the room, Ethan saw an old acquaintance of his from the military and advanced into the ballroom toward him, accepting a glass of champagne from a waiter with a tray as he did so.

Violette had to force herself not to stare after Captain Carrick when he walked away. The young woman who succeeded him in the receiving line commanded her attention, not affording her the opportunity to watch the strikingly masculine man as he moved through the room.

The man's presence was like a palpable force. From the moment she'd first looked at him, he took her breath away. An angular jaw drew her eyes to a face that had been pleasantly weathered to ruggedness, a stark contrast to so much of the unappealing aristocratic milquetoast in the room. Raw male strength emanated from his features and the dark eyes, intense, simmering with a myriad of emotions, had stirred her very depths. There was a quality she couldn't quite name that seemed to radiate from within that broad chest. His handshake had been brief, but strong and gentle at the same time. His large hand had swallowed up hers, and his voice, too, had that quality she couldn't name, but which had almost caused tears to flow.

She pasted on her best smile and shook the young woman's hand, quite unable to register the girl's name in her consciousness. Her mind was all jumbled from meeting the man who'd come before her.

Violette regretted that she'd never been the natural born actress *Maman* had been. The charade she was putting on for her father's and her fiancé's benefit was sapping every ounce of strength she had, and she was terrified she wouldn't have the force to carry out her escape plan in the wee hours of the morning.

Finally, after what had seemed forever, the last guest had arrived. Graves -- for she refused to think of this man as Richard -- offered her his arm and together they strolled to the edge of the dance floor.

The orchestra was in the middle of a waltz set and Graves pulled her out into the thick of the dancers. Of course, they all cleared a large space in the center of the dance floor for the guests of honor, and all eyes in the room were on them for a few moments before the guests resumed their dancing, drinking, and conversations.

Graves was a smooth dance partner, and Violette had no difficulty following his lead while she found her gaze sweeping over the crowds on the sidelines in search of Captain Carrick.

“Are you all right, my dear?” Graves asked.

Her gut clenched, and she looked straight at him. She hated the way he called her *my dear*, as if they’d known each other forever, instead of a mere few weeks. There was just something so bad about him. She could not put her finger on it, the same way she couldn’t name the desirable quality she sensed in the captain.

Graves smiled, his steely blue eyes raking over her face. “You seem distracted.”

She forced a smile. “*Non*, I’m fine.”

He chuckled. “I love the way you slip those little words of French into your English,” he went on. “I can’t wait to hear what will slip from you in ... more intimate venues.”

Violette’s face burned with what she knew was an embarrassing shade of scarlet. Had she not possessed a large degree of self-control, she would have pulled away from him and slapped him. But escape was, for her, life or death, and she wasn’t about to do anything to jeopardize her chance. She worked her lips into a smile. “Nor can I.”

He swung her around.

She caught sight of Captain Carrick.

Her breath hitched lightly in her throat. He radiated presence. She forced back the overwhelming need to run to him. Something in her instincts told her he’d protect her.

But what if she were wrong?

She shook away the train of thought and focused her attention on Graves and getting through the rest of the evening. Her mind went briefly to her satchel and travel dress, ready and waiting in the armoire.

The sooner this evening was done with, the sooner she could escape.

Chapter Two

The street sweeper's directions had been perfect.

Violette pulled her hood a bit further over her face as she wandered through the awakening marketplace at Covent Garden. Her heart pounded and her hands shook as she pulled what few coins she had left from her pocket to buy some fruit and bread from the vendors.

The early morning fog was beginning to burn off a bit, revealing more of the part of London where *Maman* had spent her years as an actress. She'd already passed by the Theatre Royal, where Sandrine Maynard had been a much-loved performer. Everything else had come to be because of *Maman's* years there. She had fallen in love with Martin Poole, who'd brought flowers to her dressing room after an evening's performance. Violette had been a product of this union but had not met her father until she was nearly ten years old and living in France with her mother.

So many times she'd asked *Maman* how she could love a man who never spent any time with her. *Maman* had always given the same answer. *Because, my little dove, I always saw the good things in him that his society forced him to hide away.*

Violette bit into her apple, pushing back the painful memories. Now that she had managed to slip away from her father and her fiancé to the place where her mother had risen to fame, there was still the problem of money and shelter.

Neither of which she had.

She made her way past the rows of carts in the marketplace and back onto Russell Street. Not knowing where else to go, she found her booted feet moving in the direction of the theater. She thought of going inside and telling them who her mother had been. Surely they would give the daughter of the great Sandrine Maynard some work.

But then she thought again. Bad idea. Identifying herself would be tantamount to telling her father where she was. Besides, she was not the actress her mother was. One bad performance and she would be out again on her ass.

Sighing, she took another bite of her apple, letting her gaze rove over the cobbled streets now filling with horses, wagons, and people bustling down the sidewalks.

Her mother had described this section of London to her in such great detail that before she realized what she was doing, she was turning right on Brydges Street toward the quieter neighborhood behind the Theatre Royal. To the kind of place where she could find the kind of work that would earn her enough for passage back to France.

Maman had spoken of another French woman she'd once met who ran a brothel for gentlemen not far from the theater itself. Violette saw the place as her only chance.

A few discreet inquiries brought her to Madame DuChamps's door.

With her heart pumping madly, Violette set her satchel down and lifted the knocker, letting it fall heavily against the black painted door.

Several moments later, an older woman dressed in a maid's uniform opened it. Her dark eyes widened when she saw Violette. "Can I 'elp you, miss?"

Violette cleared her throat. "*Oui, merci*. I need to speak to Madame DuChamps, please."

The woman nodded her head and stepped aside. "Come in, lovey. The madam 'asn't arisen as of yet. They're nocturnal creatures 'round 'ere."

Violette retrieved her satchel and followed the woman into the front entry. Her eye immediately caught the plush red velvet furnishings, damask wallpaper, and potted plants. The smell of stale tobacco hung in the air. A giant man in a rumpled suit sat on one of the divans, head back against the wall, snoring loudly.

"That's 'erbert," the woman said. "Just ignore 'im. 'E's 'ere to bounce the bad ones out, if you get my meaning."

Violette nodded and tightened her grip on the satchel.

The woman gestured to her. "The madam will be up in a bit. In the meantime, come back to the kitchen. I 'spect you'd fancy a cuppa and a sit-down."

"*Oui, merci.*" Violette slipped into French whenever she was terribly nervous. A cup of tea, and hopefully a croissant to go with it, sounded very good to her empty belly and aching soul.

* * * * *

Ethan knew something was terribly wrong the moment Poole's butler opened the front door. Poole had invited Ethan for breakfast the following morning, but now he had the feeling he was going to have a lot more than a pot of tea and some toast to deal with.

"Good morning, Rodham. How are you?"

The older man sighed and stepped aside to let Ethan into the front hall. "There's been some terrible excitement I'm afraid, my lord." He closed the door behind them.

From another room somewhere deeper in the house, Ethan heard Poole shouting and a young woman crying.

"How could you have let this happen?" Poole yelled.

“She was safe and sound in ’er bed, sir! I swear it! I ’elped ’er into ’er nightgown! She was goin’ to sleep when I left ’er. Oh, please, I’m so sorry!”

Rodham sighed again as he passed Ethan. “I’ll inform the master you’re here, my lord.”

Ethan watched the gray-haired man disappear down the hall and into Poole’s study.

In the next moment, Poole’s shouting stopped and he appeared in the doorway, his red hair mussed, his face like a bloated tomato. “Carrick! Thank God you’re here. Violette’s gone missing, and I’m afraid she’s been kidnapped.” He rushed down the hall and stood in front of Ethan. “I need you to find her. You’re an army man. If anyone can do it, you will.”

Kidnapped! Ethan stared down at him, the word still sifting into his consciousness.

Poole’s hands shot out and grasped Ethan’s upper arms. “Please say you’ll do it, man. Graves isn’t here yet. When he finds out about this, there’ll be bloody hell to pay!”

Ethan frowned. Poole was obviously much more worried about his own skin than his daughter’s well-being. God only knew where the girl could be and what was happening to her. “Of course I’ll look for her, Poole.”

Poole exhaled and released Ethan. “Thank God. Graves will have my hide if you don’t get Violette back.”

Bloody bastard! Ethan kept his thoughts silent and asked to see Violette’s room. The bed had been neatly made. The nightgown of which the maid had spoken was nowhere to be seen. The garderobe was in order, and there were no signs of struggle or an intruder’s entry anywhere in the room. An inquiry with all the servants of the house revealed that none of them had seen anyone strange come into the house, nor had they seen the young woman leave.

Ethan left the house and began making inquiries of anyone he could find working in the neighboring gardens; delivery people, servants on errands. Nearly an hour passed before fortune shone on him in the form of a street sweeper who’d given a young woman directions

to the Theatre Royal in the wee hours before dawn. The young man had not gotten a good look at her face but confirmed the slight French accent in her speech.

Ethan gave the sweeper a crown and went on his way, sure of two important things. One, Violette Poole had not been kidnapped. She'd slipped out of the house of her own accord. Such a feat would have required careful planning on her part. So, her enthusiasm about her upcoming marriage had been a sham to avoid arousing suspicion. He could not help but feel admiration for the young woman's courage and ingenuity. She had fooled even a seasoned army officer into believing she could possibly be happy about marrying Lord Graves.

However, such a carefully planned and executed escape also conveyed to him her desperation. He now sensed how alone and frightened she must feel. In trying to determine her course, he put himself in her place. If he were a young woman fleeing an unwanted marriage with nowhere to turn, where would he go? Knowing Poole, who was about as cheap as a man could be, Violette was probably penniless. She was also a stranger to London. Anything she would know of this city would have come from her mother, who had spent a good deal of her youth in the theatre district of Covent Garden.

Understanding struck. Yes, if he were Violette Poole, he would almost certainly go to Covent Garden, the home of the Theatre Royal, where her mother had been a celebrated actress. The thread of logic was only one of his mind, but it was all he had. He would follow it to the end.

However, he acknowledged with a chill up his spine, the area was full of brothels, the only place where a young girl, penniless and homeless, would have a chance for shelter and to earn money. God help her, he thought, hailing a cab that would take him to Covent Garden as quickly as possible.

He climbed into the cab and gave the driver the address. Sitting back against the seat, he watched Mayfair pass by the windows and listened to the horses' hooves clapping on the cobblestones.

Ethan sighed and looked down at his hands. Violette's pale delicate face came to his mind. Now that he thought about her expression while in the receiving line, her smile had seemed a bit forced and her voice tight. He'd been so enamored of her that his soldiering instincts had completely failed him. He should have known simply from the intelligence in her blue-green eyes that she wouldn't have been a willing party to such a marriage.

Then there was the way she'd looked at him, first, when he'd reached her place in the receiving line, then second, when she spotted him from the dance floor and their gazes had briefly locked. For one fleeting moment, she'd looked at him as if she wanted to curl up in his arms.

In the moment, he'd chalked her expression up to possible pre-wedding jitters. He couldn't imagine anyone, man or woman, getting married and not having some misgivings. After all, marriage implied closing oneself off to intimacy with any other partner. Now, on his way to Covent Garden in pursuit of Violette, he realized he'd misread her expression. Such a well-planned, carefully executed flight was more than jitters or misgivings. It was sheer desperation.

Ethan sighed and looked back out the window. The carriage entered the vicinity of Covent Garden, marked by the bustling marketplace and the smells of horseflesh, dung, garbage, and cheap perfume. He paid the driver and stepped down onto the cobblestones, already scanning the throngs of people for Violette. He prayed she was here and if so, that he'd find her. If his speculation about her state of mind was correct, she'd be feeling terribly alone and frightened.

The cab pulled away, and he made his way across the carriage- and wagon-loaded street toward the marketplace, his heart hammering in his chest.

As each second passed, he felt her desperation as if it were his own. Graves was a frightening person, a man who wouldn't hesitate to put another human being's life at risk above his own. Violette must have known that to have gone to these lengths to escape him.

Ethan stopped on the edge of the marketplace, a decision rooting itself firmly in his heart. If by some unearthly miracle he found Violette Poole in this human stink-hole, there was no way in hell he would return her to her father or to Graves.

* * * * *

Ethan combed the marketplace first and then the theatres, inquiring with nearly every person that crossed his path if they'd seen a young woman matching Violette's description. One fruit vendor remembered seeing her in the very early morning when she'd purchased an apple from his cart, but he didn't know where she'd gone from there.

After two hours of searching the entire Covent Garden area, he took a deep breath, realizing with mounting fear that he needed to enquire in the brothels, several of which he, himself, had spent time in as a client. He decided to start with the ones closest to the Theatre Royal.

Again, he sensed Violette's desperation. He would have bet every crown in his bank account that she had no money with her and nowhere to go. If he guessed her intentions correctly, she would want to earn enough money to pay her way back to France, the only home she'd ever known. Unfortunately, for many young women, there was only one form of employment that could possibly achieve such an end.

His heart nearly stopped.

He remembered those big blue-green eyes, the way they'd gazed at him. He truly had misread her expression. There was a world of sorrow behind them of which she could never have spoken. Life in a brothel would steal that innocent gaze from her, and he couldn't let it.

Why it was so important to him that Violette not end up like that, he wasn't sure. He knew only that his dear brother had been a victim of Graves's cruelty. Perhaps saving another person from Graves was his only way to vindicate Charles's needless suffering.

He remembered a brothel in the neighborhood behind the theatre. The place was decent enough, a house of the night for gentlemen, run by a large Frenchwoman. Madame DuChamps, she called herself, though God only knew what her real name was.

The maid who answered the door ushered him in. Her watery eyes widened at the description of Violette. "I'll get the madam for ye, milord." She bustled off before Ethan could ask her anything else.

His heart sped up. Obviously Violette had been here. The servant's reaction confirmed it. However, the girl might not still be here, and he would have to go through the madam to find out. He sighed, remembering the madam's mercenary nature. Quite a few pounds would leave his pocket before he was through here.

Madame DuChamps entered the hallway. Her blond hair, piled in an audacious coif on top of her head, completed the image of the ultimate brothel madam, her buxom figure in a silken robe swaying nonchalantly toward him. Recognition lit her blue eyes. "Ah, monsieur, *le capitaine*." She extended a manicured set of talons. "It has been too long since we see you last, *non?*"

Ethan accepted a polite but brief handshake and released the plump hand. "I've been busy."

Madame DuChamps's eyes flashed mischievously. "You and zat handsome brother of yours must come back. We always have a girl who loves to entertain you together."

He cleared his throat. He and Charlie had been known to share a woman occasionally. "Actually, Madame, I'm here in search of a young woman who might have come seeking employment." He gave a brief description of Violette.

Madame DuChamps lifted a blond eyebrow and grinned. "*Oui, capitaine*. Zat girl is here. She is pure. A *vierge*. If you wish to have her first, I will be delighted. Name your price."

Ethan's gut lurched. "I wish to speak with her, please."

The plump madam chuckled knowingly. “Her time is money, *monsieur*. Play or talk. She has signed on with me and must earn her keep. You understand, of course.”

Inwardly he sighed. Of course he understood. Thank God he kept plenty of notes in his billfold. Madame DuChamps’s virgin auctions were well known, and drunken gentlemen spent exorbitant amounts. He was prepared to go well above the price to ensure the woman’s complete cooperation. He’d need her willingness to let him buy Violette out of the place on her first day. Busting her out by force was not an option. He couldn’t do anything drastic that would risk the news reaching Violette’s father or, worse, her fiancé.

“All right. Two hundred pounds.”

The madam’s blue eyes widened like saucers and a look of sheer glee brightened her plump face. “Oh, *capitaine*, for zat price, you may remain with her zee entire afternoon!”

He nodded and pulled the bills out, counting them off and handing them to her. “There it is in advance.”

Her red talons and plump fingers wrapped around the wad of pound notes. “*Merci bien, capitaine*. Please, wait in zee salon. We do not customarily entertain clients at luncheon and she will need a few moments to prepare.”

Ethan bowed. “Of course.”

Madame DuChamps clapped her hands in the direction of the salon. A large man in a crumpled suit was asleep on a divan, snoring. At the madam’s sound, his eyes popped open and he stood up quickly.

“Erbert, get zee gentleman a drink while ’e waits and zen guard zee door. Zat’s what I pay you for.” The madam punctuated her order by turning with a flourish of her wrap and heading up the staircase.

Ethan watched Herbert straighten his suit, run a hand over his unshaven jaw and lumber slowly toward the liquor cart, nodding politely to Ethan as he passed by. He poured a glass of whiskey, served it to him and hurried to the front door.

Ethan sighed, sweeping his gaze over the familiar room with its potted ferns, dark, carved furniture and bright reds everywhere, from velvet upholstery to damask wallpaper. He and Charlie had found some pleasure in this place before they'd left for India. The brothel had, for him, lost its charms since it had become the only sanctuary for Violette, an innocent, desperate to escape a fate to which her own father had condemned her. And no doubt in Ethan's mind, through trickery.

A quarter of an hour later, he heard movement on the stairs. Through the salon doorway, he saw two pairs of women's heeled boots descending. First came the plump, imposing figure of the madam. Quickly he set down his untouched whiskey and stood, his gaze riveted on the figure following the older woman.

Violette Poole moved with deliberate, careful steps, one pale hand slipping gently along the banister.

The two women reached the bottom step and started for the salon.

Ethan's breath caught. Miss Poole had been made up to entertain him, and she wore almost nothing, except for a silken, nearly see-through chemise that outlined her full breasts, slim waist, and even fuller hips. The ruffled pantalettes ended just below her knees, giving him a hint of her pale smooth calves above the elegant ankle boots.

He ran his gaze back up to her face, lightly powdered. Pale spots of darker pink flushed her cheeks. The madam had swept the girl's coppery hair into a mass of riotous, sensual curls around her head, showing off the swan-like curve of her neck. Her graceful pale arms hung by her sides. The sight of her caused his long-slumbering groin to tighten and his heart to race.

Were it not for her expression, he would have become completely aroused. Fear hung like a palpable force around her. Her large green-blue eyes stared at him, grievously full of apprehension. Miss Poole looked more like a woman about to face a hanging jury rather than a woman of the night about to entertain a man.

The madam gave the young woman a nudge toward him. She took a halting step forward and stopped a few feet away.

Ethan glanced past Miss Poole to the older woman. "Thank you. That will be all."

His tone obviously dismissed Madame DuChamps, for she bestowed her mercenary gleam on him and left the salon. He then looked at Violette Poole. The poor girl's lower lip trembled, rousing in him the desire to lower his mouth to hers and gently kiss away her fear.

"Miss Poole, I need to speak to you alone." He doubted the wisdom of being alone with her in one of the upstairs bedrooms, but he certainly couldn't risk having Madame DuChamps or any of her staff overhear the two of them. He lowered his voice to a careful tone. "I promise I won't do anything to hurt you."

Her large eyes widened slightly at his statement and a touch of the fear in them seemed to leave. Silently she nodded and turned. "This way, Captain."

Ethan followed her to the stairs, working to keep his gaze off of her buttocks, which pushed against the thin material of her pantalettes with each step she took. The scent of rosewater invaded his nostrils and the sight of her luxurious pile of red curls made him want to pull the pins out and bury his face in the soft tresses.

He tore his thoughts away from such desires. He was here for one reason only, to get Miss Poole out of London, and away from the wolves. He wasn't here to fall in love with her.

The hallway at the top of the stairs held corridors of bedrooms on either side, some of which were opened, revealing women in various stages of undress, lounging, or brushing their hair. One pretty blonde caught sight of him and winked before turning her back and continuing to put on her chemise.

He cleared his throat and kept his attention on the back of Miss Poole's hair as she led him to a door at the end of the corridor. She opened it, revealing a bedroom as gaudily decorated with cushions and dark carved woods as the salon downstairs. He went in and stood by one of the bed posts, watching her close the door softly and stand in front of it.

Had the circumstances been different, she would probably have come over to him and begun undressing him. As it was, she stood, her hands hanging again at her sides, watching him as if he held a loaded revolver pointed right at her. To Ethan's chagrin, the flimsy material of her underclothes revealed to him the dark pink spots of her nipples and the triangle of hair at the apex of her thighs. He swallowed past the lump in his throat and perched on the edge of the bed, shifting so as to hide the growing evidence of her effect on him.

"Captain, if you've come here to drag me back, you are wasting your time. I will kill myself first before going back to either of those men. I swear it." Her soft voice held an iron determination and Ethan feared she actually would be so desperate as to do such a thing.

He swore silently he would never give her reason to try. "Miss Poole, I give you my word as a gentleman that I have no intention of forcing you to go back."

He watched her eyes glisten with a rush of unshed tears and her hands ball into fists. "I mean no offense, my lord, but isn't such a statement the perfect way to gain my trust and lure me back without a fight? No doubt Lord Graves will pay you handsomely for my safe return."

Ethan felt a surge of admiration for her spirit and intelligence. "Perhaps it would be if I were someone else. But I'll be honest with you. First, I'm a wealthy man of my own means and don't need his money. And secondly, I have a vested interest in keeping you away from him, other than the fact that I would be a heartless monster to force you to be with him when you so obviously despise him."

Miss Poole tilted her head and stared at him. Obviously he'd captured her interest, which thankfully had begun to replace some of the apprehension in her gaze. "What is your vested interest, Captain?"

He took a deep breath, preparing inwardly to revisit the pain of the past. "Well, Graves is a murderer and a thief."

Violette Poole sighed. "You have confirmed my suspicions of his character," she said softly. "However, there are many murderers and thieves in the world. What has he done specifically that makes you want to help me?"

"I don't know how much you know about British politics --"

"Very little. Enlighten me, if it will help me understand."

Ethan nodded. "Graves was a vehement supporter of Lord Dalhousie in Parliament. Dalhousie pushed the doctrine of lapse through, as well as the annexation of the Oudh principate. These changes basically set the stage for the Indian Mutiny of 1857, in which my brother and I both were caught during our service. I escaped unharmed. But Charles lost his wife, murdered by a fellow officer, and the use of his legs."

He fell silent and looked away. Speaking of the event brought back all the pain, the searing loss, and yet, also the gratitude that Charlie was alive and had hope to recover. "Aside from that, Miss Poole, Graves's stance only proves what a cruel person he is at heart, completely lacking in respect for any other human being or culture. He cares only for his own desires and fulfilling them. I would not have you at his mercy." He gestured to her. "I hope that is a satisfactory explanation of my selfish motive."

The young woman remained silent, but her large, breathtaking eyes spoke to him. Never before had he seen such a world of emotions pass through a pair of eyes. One moment he saw sorrow, the next doubt. And yet in the next, a shifting kaleidoscope of hope, admiration, and fear. Her soft, delicate hands never stopped clenching and unclenching. Under the silky chemise, her breasts rose and fell, drawing his gaze.

He swallowed hard. His erection resurged and pushed with demand against his trousers.

"This is all true, what you've told me, my lord?"

He nodded. "I'd swear it on my mother's tomb. I'd stake my entire reputation on every detail. Besides, it's all verifiable in the records."

Miss Poole looked down at the worn Oriental carpet under her shoes. "What if his crimes had not affected you so personally?" Her gaze rose to his. "Would you have wanted to rescue me then?" She fell silent and looked away. A soft sigh escaped her, conveying to Ethan her deep distress.

"Yes." He knew it was true and did not hesitate. "I ... failed to save so many people during the Mutiny. I swore that if I ever had a chance not to fail in this regard, I wouldn't." He looked down briefly. "I would do whatever I could to help you, no matter the circumstances."

Finally, she looked back up at him. "I want so very badly to believe you. I felt last night when my father introduced us that you had a certain quality I admired. I couldn't name it at first, but I know what it is now."

He returned her gaze while his heart seemed to scud across his chest. "May I ask what that quality is?"

She looked intently at him another moment then nodded. "*Oui*. It is kindness. You seem kind."

He bowed his head. "Thank you."

To his surprise, she took a few steps closer to him, approaching him with the seeming caution of a lion tamer to his subject. "Unfortunately, my lord, this is a matter of life or death to me. My father tricked me. He lured me to England with promises of being the father to me he never was. In my grief over my mother's death, I was desperate for such a relationship and made the journey here, only to find he had already arranged my marriage to Lord Graves. So you see, I cannot trust easily, even though if I were to trust any man, it would be you."

Ethan raked a hand through his hair, thinking. Of course, he completely understood her mistrust, and yet he also knew he was probably the one person in the world right now who could help her. He knew it sounded insane to her that he should care so much about

someone he didn't even know, but he couldn't stem the rising tide of emotion that welled up in him each time he looked at her. "In that case, I'm honored, Miss Poole. Please, tell me what I can do to prove myself to you, to help you feel confident I won't force you back to your father."

Again, her gaze rested on his face, the blue-green color of her eyes swirling and melting with inner turmoil. "If I tell you what it is you can do, Captain, will you promise to do it?"

Something in her voice made his gut coil with tension. Yet the underlying silkiness of her soft voice and the blend of French and English accent caressed his being and heated his blood as if he were standing near a bonfire.

He nodded. "If it will enable me to gain your confidence, then yes, I promise."

Violette Poole took another step toward him, sending a seductive whiff of roses his way. "Thank you," she breathed. "What I need you to do, Captain Carrick, is ... to ruin me."

Chapter Three

“Ruin you?” The captain shoved a large hand again through his hair.

Violette tried to ignore the dark silky texture of his locks as they sifted through his fingers. Or the way his large sideburns framed his strong cheeks and jaw.

He took a deep breath. “Miss Poole, do you realize what you’re asking? I don’t think you do.”

His wide-eyed stare was making her think that her request had disgusted him. Perhaps it had. *Maman* had worked with men in the theater who preferred men to women in their bed. Her heartbeat increased from pounding to thundering and heat flushed her cheeks. “Of course I realize what I’m asking. I’m not a child.” She crossed her arms in front of her, suddenly ashamed of her near nakedness. Secretly, she’d been glad that the captain was the first man to see her in her underthings. She only wished that she knew for absolute certain that she could completely trust him. Then giving him her virginity would not only be a bargaining chip for her safety, but it would also be the fulfillment of one of her life’s wishes: to give herself to a good, honorable man.

She glanced down at her shoes. “Am I so repulsive to you?” The question slipped out softly, without the force of her previous words.

She heard him sigh.

“Of course not, Miss Poole. You’re beautiful. Stunning, actually.”

Her gaze snapped to his even as the heat in her face deepened. “Do you mean that? Or are you just saying it?”

His eyes, a deep shade of chocolate, appeared to darken further. “I don’t just *say* anything, Miss Poole. Your mother was a great beauty, and you resemble her almost exactly, except for the color of your hair.”

Huskiness tinged the gentle tone of his voice, and his praise sent tingles of warmth along every inch of her skin. She found herself liking him more than was safe. “Then why did you respond that way to my request?”

He braced his elbows on his knees, a darkly troubled look straining his handsome features. “Because you deserve better than to give yourself to a man under these circumstances. You’re young and beautiful and ... well ... you’ve already suffered enough at the hands of men. Your introduction to ...” He appeared to stumble on the words. “... to ... physical ... relations ... shouldn’t happen this way, under duress.”

His words were kind and his tone sincere. Violette’s heart ached to believe him. However, one misstep, and she could end up back in her father’s clutches. Worse, Graves’s. Graves repulsed her with his slimy touch and disgusting innuendoes.

Non. There was only one way she could leave here with the captain and know for certain he wouldn’t bring her back.

Her hand went to the laces of her shimmy. She pulled them and the top portion of the silky cloth fell open, revealing all of her chest. One soft strap slipped off her shoulder, revealing the very tops of her breasts and a hint of cleavage. She stepped closer to him.

He had been looking at the floor, but her movement drew his attention. He looked up. His breath caught audibly. “Miss Poole --”

Her heart pumped madly, and she forced herself to breathe deeply.

The captain was sitting up now, watching her approach him. His broad chest rose and fell, pushing against his jacket. His lips were slightly parted, and his dark eyes smoldered.

She sank down onto the bed next to him, inwardly shocked at the boldness her desperation gave her. "Captain, this is the only way. Only then will I know for sure I can trust you."

His gaze roved over her exposed flesh, and his breathing deepened. No, he certainly wasn't repulsed by her. "Miss Poole --"

"You're not married, are you?"

He shook his head. "No. But --"

"Please." Her voice had fallen to a near whisper. She reached for his hand and brought it to her chest, pressing it against her. "*Je vous en prie.*" Her eyes fluttered closed, and heat flushed in her skin from the warm strength of his hand. Emotions swirled inside of her, not the least of which was the burning need for affection.

When she opened her eyes, he was still watching her, his dark eyes churning and smoldering. He appeared locked in an inner struggle, and the terror of rejection flared in her.

Unbidden, tears sprang to her eyes, and the captain's ruggedly handsome face blurred. If he truly wanted her, wouldn't he have already responded?

"I'm sorry," she whispered. She released his hand, waiting for him to lift it away.

He didn't.

Her breath caught.

His gaze remained locked with hers for a few breathtaking moments. He looked down at where his hand rested on her chest. He moved his fingertips, dappling a light touch on her flesh, just above the neckline of her chemise, then gently slid his hand up, across her collarbone. His large hand came to rest on the back of her neck, like a warm, protective cradle.

He moved closer to her, simultaneously drawing her to him with a light pressure from his hand. He raised his other hand and brushed his fingertips across her cheek.

His touch was gentle, yet gave a hint of the passion coiled inside of him.

He continued his tender exploration across the seam of her lips and down her chin, to her throat, which he traced delicately.

Her skin tingled wildly from the captain's touch, and her body melted rapidly. *Maman* had always told her that men existed who had the power to make a woman feel like the most beautiful creature on this earth from a simple touch. She told Violette that she knew this to be true because Violette's father, strangely enough, Martin Poole, had touched her that way.

In this moment, with heat swirling in her sex and her breasts heaving, Violette understood what her mother had meant.

The captain's eyes smoldered into hers for another moment, and then something appeared to unleash itself inside of him. He slanted his lips over hers.

The first kiss was brief, soft. Just long enough to give her a small taste of him, musky and delicious.

She wanted more. She parted her lips, burning for him to kiss her again.

The soft invitation seemed to draw him. He pressed more firmly this time, sliding his tongue between her lips, mating it against hers.

A soft groan vibrated from deep inside him. He pulled her more firmly against him. The hand cradling her neck slipped deeper into her hair, loosening the pins. His other hand covered her shoulder, easing the strap of the camisole away to caress her bare skin unimpeded.

She sighed softly, melting under his touch and kiss. His scent, an intoxicating blend of spicy aftershave and earth, invaded her senses, making her feel as if only he existed in this moment and the rest of the world had disappeared.

Her hair came loose and tumbled in riotous waves down her back and shoulders, covering his hands.

He deepened their kiss, swirling his tongue against hers, gulping more greedily at the softness of her mouth.

She moaned.

Gently, he pulled away from their kiss, nibbling her jaw while he pushed her gently onto her back.

She stared up at him. Her sex now throbbed madly, and she could feel her own moist readiness.

The captain's skin had flushed darkly, and he was breathing heavily. He pushed open her camisole and lowered the other strap, revealing her right breast. His breath caught in his throat. "My God, you're exquisite," he breathed.

His praise shimmered through her in warm waves. She looked up at him and slipped the fingers of one hand into his dark hair. It was silky and luxurious, sifting between her fingertips. She laced her fingers within the dark mane, following the movement of his head to her breast.

The fingertips of one large hand traced the swell of pale flesh while he closed his mouth over the nipple, suckling it tenderly into a stiff peak.

Violette sucked in her breath. The sensation of his mouth, hot and moist on the sensitive bud, sent a jolt of heat through her. Never could she have imagined such a sensation. Nothing *Maman* had ever told her about erotic love between a man and a woman had prepared her for the reality. Instinctively, she arched her back, pushing her breast against his hungry mouth, her fingers curling deeply in his hair.

The captain's rhythmic tightening and releasing of her nipple sent another wave of searing heat through her. The sensation traveled along an invisible chord down her stomach into her sex, where she already felt wet and open, ready to take him inside her.

His mouth moved back to hers. Parting her lips wider, she returned his kisses with mounting fervor. The pleasure of their joined mouths overwhelmed her, and she moaned, the sound vibrating between them.

Her sound seemed to jolt him, and he pulled away, looking down into her eyes. He sat up and shrugged hurriedly out of his jacket, letting it drop to the floor. His hands went to his vest and worked open the buttons with equal speed. He pulled it off and let it fall onto his jacket. He put his hands on the bed, bridging her torso and looked down at her. "You're certain of this, Miss Poole?"

His voice was low and husky, moving through her like a sensuous caress.

She nodded. "*Oui*, more than anything."

He cupped her cheek, his thumb brushing the skin tenderly. "I cannot promise you anything, except my protection."

She didn't expect the tiny ache in her heart that accompanied his words. Staring up at him, she found herself captured in his brown eyes, in the earnestness and gentleness mixed with simmering desire. She knew then that she could trust him. "I understand," she whispered.

He undid his collar and pulled it off.

She reached up and worked open the buttons of his white shirt.

He took hold of her hands and stilled her. While she watched him, he yanked the starched shirt off, followed by the cotton undershirt.

She caught her breath at the sight of his powerful chest dusted with silky dark hair. She reached up, allowing her trembling hands to roam over the muscle, the hair covering it soft under her touch. The feel of his skin, warm and masculine, heated her blood more and her thoughts floated away as if carried on a breeze. Nothing else mattered but what was happening now.

The pad of one fingertip brushed his nipple, smooth and flat. He sucked in a breath and lowered his muscular torso down onto her once again, his lips sinking deeply against hers.

She accepted him gladly, her legs opening to accommodate his muscular body between them. Though he still wore his trousers, the hard bulge in the front pressed demandingly against her core, rubbing her sensitive flesh through the filmy pantalettes. The sensation pulled a tiny moan from her, and she slid her hands around him, brazenly exploring the terrain of muscles flexing in his back.

Once again, he lifted his lips from hers and trailed warm moist kisses down her neck and chest to take her nipple into his mouth. He suckled it tenderly while one hand caressed the length of her torso, his fingertips skimming down the underside of her breast, along her waist to her hip.

A soft groan emanated from his throat, and he raised his face from her breast. His dark eyes smoldered under heavy lids, and his skin was flushed darkly. He fingered the drawstring of her pantalettes. "Take these off, please," he rasped.

He rolled off her to his feet and began pulling off his shoes and trousers.

With her heart pumping madly, Violette pulled off her ankle boots and pantalettes. She then drew back the covers of the bed and climbed in, watching the captain remove his drawers.

He slipped the cotton material off and stood in front of her, appearing like a statue of a Greek god she'd seen when *Maman* had taken her to the Louvre years ago. His erection jutted out thick and heavy from its nest of dark hair. His muscular thighs sloped into equally strong calves.

The sight of him took her breath away, and her heart slammed against her chest.

He stepped forward and climbed into the bed next to her, gathering her into his arms. Tenderly, he pulled her body against his, his large hands smoothing up and down her back, skimming over her buttocks. He dappled small kisses along the side of her neck to her

shoulder before returning to her lips and plunging his tongue deep into the soft recesses of her mouth with possessive heat.

His hand explored her breasts again, then slid down her arm to her hip. He turned her slightly onto her back and raked his fingertips over the curls on her mons.

Violette whimpered softly. His touch heated her blood, making her hungry for him to be inside her. She parted her legs just a little bit, and he slid his touch down her lower lips, venturing gently between the folds.

She moaned into his mouth. The mere brush of his fingertips on her most intimate core made her mindless with the pleasure.

He deepened his exploration, rubbing her clitoris in tiny circles and then slipping a fingertip into her velvety opening, slick with arousal. Her hands laced once again into his hair, and she tilted her head back on the pillow. He pushed another finger inside her, his thumb working the swollen nubbin where so much pleasure was concentrated. He didn't stop caressing her inner sex until the pressure of bliss exploded, shaking her with a deep orgasm. She cried out from the intense spiral of heat traveling from her sex into her belly. After several long glorious moments, it passed, leaving her limp against the pillows. She wondered in her erotic haze if she should touch him the same way.

As if he'd read her mind, the captain moved his body on top of hers and nestled his muscular body between her open legs. He looked down at her with a gentle yet passionate gaze, pushing her hair back off her face. "Are you ready, Violette?" His voice was a mere husky whisper.

She nodded, her hands splayed on his chest, enjoying the hard muscle and soft hair under her fingertips. "*Oui*," she whispered back. "I'm ready."

He lowered his face to hers and kissed her softly. One hand reached down between her thighs, spreading her open. With a gentle thrust of his hips, he pushed the head of his erection into the opening of her swollen channel.

Violette gasped softly at the sensation. She opened her legs wider, silently begging him to go deeper. As if on command, he pushed again, just enough to send a thrill of heat through her womb. Slowly, bit by bit, he filled her, stretched her open, carefully working his way inside.

When he came up against her maidenhead, he paused, took her mouth in a deep kiss and pushed through, gently but firmly, until their bodies pressed together.

The final thrust caused her to gasp, ending their kiss.

He looked down at her, his dark eyes filled with concern. "I'm not hurting you, am I?"

"*Non.*" Tears sprang to her eyes, moved as she was by the tender way he was taking her. "You're not hurting me at all." She reached up and caressed his hair, her heart burning passionately in her chest.

Slowly, he began moving, sliding his cock in and out of her in careful strokes.

A tiny breath escaped her with each gentle thrust. Her inner flesh was tender, yet the sensation of his maleness filling her overcame the physical discomfort. She'd known the moment she'd seen the captain the night before that he was the kind of man she'd always wished to have bring her into the world of erotic love.

She'd gotten her wish.

He kissed her again, lingering long and heatedly on her lips. His tongue swirled sensuously around hers as he increased the rhythm of his strokes inside her.

She spread her legs wider, moving her hips instinctively against his rhythm. *Maman* had always said that physical pleasure was something that the woman could give the man as well. Violette was grateful for her mother's frankness and openness.

She squeezed her vaginal muscles tightly around his shaft and matched his rhythm with hers. Her effort was rewarded with a long, deep, male groan.

He looked down at her, his face flushed with pleasure. His musky scent permeated the air around them. "How did you know to do that, Violette?"

“My mother told me.”

To her surprise, a grin spread across his lips and he laughed softly, slipping his hands around her to encircle her in his arms.

She squeezed again.

He gasped, his eyelids fluttering. “Don’t stop,” he rasped.

She obeyed, bucking her hips up and down, massaging his cock even as he moved inside her.

He captured her lips in a deep, fervent kiss, his mouth remaining mated with hers as he thrust in a fevered rhythm inside her.

She lost all measure of time, not knowing how long their bodies were joined in this erotic dance before he moaned, slipped out of her and stroked his hard length, his seed pulsing warmly onto her bare stomach.

After several moments, he stopped stroking himself and collapsed lightly beside her, his lips pressed to her shoulder, his chest heaving, his fingertips skimming lightly along her waist.

She turned her head on the pillow. His dark hair brushed her lips. She closed her eyes, her body still tingling from his lovemaking. Her sex still pulsed from the sudden emptiness where his hard *zizi* had been inside her.

She sighed, waiting for her breath to return to normal. She found herself waiting to hear words of love from him.

Sadness gripped her heart. That’s not why he’d been with her. She had no right to expect such a declaration. She stared up at the ceiling, listening to the sounds of a horse-drawn carriage clapping along the cobblestones in the street below.

The captain reached up and smoothed back her hair. The caress was tender and if she hadn’t known better, she would have thought he loved her. For only a lover could touch his beloved with such affectionate zeal as he was touching her. “Violette,” he whispered.

Her heart fluttered. The way her name sounded in his voice was sweet, like spring. *Maman* was the only person who had ever said her name so sweetly. Until now. Only this was different. The captain was a handsome man. A kind man. Someone she could ...

No. Love couldn't enter into this. He was helping her until she could get back to France, away from her father and Graves. She couldn't allow her heart to melt away like it was in this moment.

"Violette."

He'd said her name again.

"We must go now. I want to get you out of London as soon as possible."

He reached for a handkerchief and wiped his seed off of her. To her disappointment, he then released her and rose from the bed. She watched him retrieve his clothing from the floor and extract one item from the pile. In the next moment, his torso of chiseled muscle was covered with his undershirt and he was stepping into his drawers.

He turned to her, the movement jolting her from the trance of watching him dress.

The briefest of smiles flickered across his lips, replaced by a solemn gaze. "Get dressed quickly." His tone was gentle and patient, yet urgent.

She pushed back the covers and climbed from the bed. Slipping into her chemise and pantalettes, she then padded across the room to the garderobe and pulled out the satchel she'd brought with her when she had escaped her father's house. She opened it and pulled out the plain blouse and skirts she'd worn. She hadn't even bothered with a corset. The morning of her escape seemed so long ago, yet it had really only been a few hours. She hadn't expected to be putting these clothes back on so soon.

The captain finished dressing and told her he'd wait for her downstairs. Although he didn't say the words, Violette knew that he meant to speak to Madame DuChamps about buying her out. She watched him leave, closing the door softly behind him.

She buttoned up her blouse, her face burning with guilt. The captain didn't even know her, and in one morning she had drawn him deeply into her life and her problems. God only knew how much money it was costing him to get her out of here. If she knew *Maman*, her mother would have sworn to the captain to repay every penny he'd spent.

Violette vowed that was what she'd do. With a sigh, she finished dressing and pinning up her hair, put her cloak on and lifted the hood over her hair. She picked up the satchel with her few earthly belongings and went out to meet the captain downstairs.

Chapter Four

Another fifty pounds had allowed Ethan to buy Violette from Madame DuChamps. After all, he'd been a customer there in the past and knew she wanted his return business. Back on the street, he ushered Violette into a cab, which took them to where his carriage was being kept. He left word with a valet at his club to have his things sent, rather than go to his room to retrieve them himself. He did not want to risk leaving her alone anywhere, lest her father or Graves have detectives about, and had his carriage readied. Within minutes, they were on their way out of London.

Violette was quiet during the journey, and Ethan stole glances at her. She kept her hands folded primly in her lap, and her somber-hued clothing of grays and blues, along with her subdued expression, completely belied the passionate, lusty woman he'd lain with just a short time earlier.

The mere flash of a memory set his blood heating and his groin tightening again. He fought not to remember the rose scent of her skin and its pale softness, the way it practically melted under his lips and tongue. He tried, unsuccessfully, to block the echoes of the soft sounds of delight and satisfaction she'd made and the way her entire body trembled when he brought her to orgasm.

Good God, how was he going to stay away from her while she lived under the same roof with him? And yet, that was what he must do. She had no intention of staying in England, understandably, and he had no intention of falling in love. He had too large a burden of guilt toward Charlie to reckon with, not to mention his own apprehension about romantic involvement. The situation was far too complex. There was no allowance for falling in love. However, if he gave in to his desire, that was exactly the danger.

He turned abruptly and stared out the window. The carriage had passed out of London, opening up to the green of the countryside. He wondered briefly what Charlie would think of the situation. What he would think of Violette.

Charlie. Of course! He glanced quickly at Violette, but her gaze remained on the passing scenery. Perhaps, just maybe, Charlie would take a liking to her ...

“Captain.”

Ethan turned at the sound of her soft voice. Her wide-eyed gaze was now turned on him. The sadness in their blue-green depths stirred him, making him starkly aware of the losses and betrayals she’d suffered. God help him, he didn’t want to cause her any more pain. “Yes, Violette? You don’t mind if I call you by your given name, do you?”

A tiny smile curved the corners of her dusky lips. “I do not mind at all, my lord.”

He fought to keep his breath steady. By God, she was enchanting! He tamped down the desire to have her call him Ethan. He needed the bit of distance the formality gave him. And besides, there was already enough affection in her voice when she addressed him. He didn’t want to invite more. “Did you have something to tell me?”

She nodded. “*Oui*. I ... wanted to thank you again for all you’re doing. *Maman* would have been so grateful, too, if she’d known. You are a very kind man.”

Her words sent a flush of warmth through him, and he knew it was already too late. He was more than half in love with her. “You needn’t thank me, Violette. I believe you’d have done the same for me if the situation were reversed.”

She looked at him steadily for several moments. As usual, a million thoughts and feelings seemed to pass through her eyes. "Of course I would. But even so, Captain, I insist on repaying you whatever it cost to buy me from Madame DuChamps."

He smiled at her, at the earnestness in her tone. He also doubted she had a penny to her name. "I appreciate your sentiment. However, I don't wish for you to do such a thing."

Her pretty face crumpled to a frown. "But it is the proper thing to do."

"First of all, Violette, I'm very wealthy. I won't miss the money. And secondly, I don't think you'd have wanted repayment either, if the tables were turned. Would you?"

She stared at him, her posture erect as she braced herself against the swaying and bumping of the carriage. "No, I would not, of course." Her brow furrowed. "But the tables are not turned, and I insist you allow me to do something kind for you in return."

Ethan sat back and sighed. He let his gaze rest on her face. As far as he was concerned, the way she'd shared her body with him, her openness and wholehearted giving and enjoyment of their lovemaking had been more than enough repayment. He sensed, however, that she wouldn't find that answer acceptable to her pride. He also knew that if he were in her position, he would feel terribly obligated. He cast about in his mind for some way she could show her gratitude.

In moments, he had his answer.

He looked at her. "There is one great service you could do that would help me immensely."

Her heart-shaped face brightened. "What is it, Captain?"

He took a deep breath. "Well, I would like it very much if you would spend time with my brother, Charles."

A flicker of disappointment passed through her eyes. "Your brother lives with you?"

Ethan bit back a pang of guilt. "Yes. Since he was wounded, I've looked after him. His spirits have never recovered from what happened. Queen Victoria knighted him for his

bravery, but that hardly matters. A medal, of course, no matter how prestigious, cannot heal his wounds. He's been in a wheelchair ever since. The doctors have told him repeatedly he could walk if he tries and works up his strength." He paused and sighed, glancing out the window. This part always made him feel hopeless, as if he were descending into an abyss of sadness. "But he doesn't have the heart to try. I was hoping that friendship would give him encouragement. Friendship, with someone sweet and good, like you."

For several long moments she looked at him, the same myriad of emotions passing through her eyes. "That is terrible," she said softly. "I feel for him. But it must be very sad for you, as well. You seem to care so deeply for him."

Her sensitive assessment and sincere tone moved him. "It is sad for me. I love him very much. He's all the family I have left. Which is why I'm asking of you what I've asked."

A look of deep longing came into her gaze, as if she wanted to reach out and touch him and was holding back. Of course, he sensed that his lack of affection after making love to her was giving her reason for caution.

"Of course I will extend friendship to him, Captain. But I cannot promise that he will respond."

He nodded, admiring the wisdom and understanding in her response. He sensed a depth to this young woman that was beyond her years and suspected strongly it was her mother's influence in her character. "Thank you, Violette. You know, I had the pleasure of seeing your mother perform onstage many years ago. She was a wonderful actress."

A tiny smile crossed Violette's lips and her fathomless eyes lit up at the mention of her mother. "My mother was a wonderful woman in so many ways." Her smile faded. "She never stopped loving my father, even after all the cruel ways he treated her."

He nodded. "I'm sorry you lost her," he said gently.

Her bottom lip trembled and sadness filled her eyes. "Thank you." Her voice escaped in a whisper and she turned to the window, giving him the sense she didn't want him to see her tears.

The captain's estate was magnificent. After a sweeping driveway Violette thought was endless, the carriage came to a stop in front of a mansion. Wide steps, many tall windows and balconies sat amidst manicured lawns and gardens with footpaths. The gathering dusk provided a magnificent backdrop of pinks and purples, giving the scene a magical glow. She realized immediately why he'd been so anxious to get her out of London. This place looked like it had many nooks and crannies in which to hide.

The captain descended and held out his hand to her. A small thrill of heat ran up her arm at the touch of his hand, even through her glove. Her gaze locked onto his briefly, just before she stepped down onto the graveled driveway. With her feet on the ground, the captain released her hand. "Come," he said gently.

He led her up the steps, drawing her attention to the bustle of servants gathering to greet their master. At the entry he introduced her to the assembly as a long lost cousin come to visit her relations. A strange tingle burned in her stomach when he referred to her as Viola Carrick.

An elderly man in a butler's uniform stepped forward, informing the captain that Sir Charles had gone to the Hazleton's estate to settle a dispute between two of their servants.

"Thank you, Mason." The captain turned to her, a small grin turning up one side of his mouth. "Charlie is a natural diplomat. And he is well liked over there. They'll probably have him stay to supper. You probably won't meet him until tomorrow.

She nodded and followed him into the large foyer. The house was as magnificent inside as outside, with marbled floors, chandeliers, and gilt-framed paintings. Violette imagined a person could spend days exploring all the rooms of this vast structure.

“Welcome to Carrick Manor,” the captain said.

She gave him a shy smile. “Thank you.”

“Now, I’ve ordered supper for us. Charlotte, here, will show you to a room where you can rest first, if you’d like.”

She nodded again, her calm exterior belying a rising panic. The thought of being alone in her room frightened her, as if her father or Graves could be lying in wait to snatch her away from the safety the captain was offering.

He seemed to sense her distress. “I won’t be far away.” He touched her arm briefly, a look of sympathy warming his dark eyes. “If you need me, I’ll be in my study. Charlotte will attend you, and you need only ask her. All right?”

Reassured, she nodded.

Slowly he turned and left her with the maid called Charlotte.

Charlotte took her satchel. “This way, miss.” She ushered her through the foyer into a hallway. “We’ll have a bath for you, miss, and then change your dress.”

“I ... don’t have any other dress.” Violette watched the maid work to hide an expression of surprise. Obviously, the young woman hadn’t been expecting Violette to be a “poor” relation of the Carrick brothers.

Charlotte smiled. “No worry about that, miss. I’m certain your trunks will follow.”

Violette nodded. “Yes, they will.” Even though, of course, all her dresses and effects were in her bedroom at her father’s house, a place from which she certainly could never retrieve them. A heavy sadness enveloped her as Charlotte held open a door for her.

The bedroom was large and airy. A huge four-poster bed of carved mahogany stood against one wall. Two large windows draped with gauzy curtains lined the walls, along with a pair of French doors.

“You have a beautiful view of the back lawns, miss.” Charlotte set down her satchel and hurried over to the French doors. She opened them to the view of the sunset on the lawns.

Violette stepped out onto the balcony and caught her breath. “How lovely!”

A large reflecting pool surrounded by gardens ran the length of the back lawn. The setting sun was reflected in pinks and oranges on the still water as it sank behind the canopy of a forest in the distance.

When Violette finally turned back into the bedroom, she saw Charlotte standing nearby with a towel draped over one arm, smiling. “Come, miss, there’s a nice hot tub waiting for you.”

At Violette’s insistence, the maid left her to undress and bathe by herself. She’d never liked having someone fuss over her and had made an exception only the night before when dressing for the engagement party. Her strategy had been to appear as if she were happy about everything her life presented to her so no one would ever suspect she was planning to run away.

Sinking into the hot water, Violette lay back against the tub and closed her eyes. The scent of roses curled up with the steam and the heat seeped into her bones, making her aware of how exhausted she actually was.

She shifted in the water, becoming aware of the soreness between her thighs. The sensation brought back memories of the captain, of the way he touched her and kissed her. Her breasts tingled as if his hands still caressed them. She could still almost feel the flickering moist heat as he feathered the tip of his tongue on her bare skin. A pulse began in her sex at the remembrance of the way he’d filled her, carefully, gently, bringing her to orgasm with his fingertips before taking his own pleasure ...

Opening her eyes, Violette busied herself with soaking a washcloth in the tub and lathering it over her skin. It wouldn’t do to indulge in fantasizing about the man. He didn’t

have any real feelings for her except for sympathy. He was helping her to escape her father and Graves. He'd made that abundantly clear. He obviously had no intention of making love to her again or deepening their relationship. His strange request to befriend his brother had only confirmed that. Something in the way he spoke about Sir Charles had given her the sinking feeling he was doing a bit of matchmaking. However, she couldn't become attached to either of them, seeing as she intended to leave England. Besides, even if she weren't leaving, how could she possibly know that Sir Charles would feel anything for her? She hadn't even met the man and wouldn't until the following day.

Violette remained in the tub until the water began to cool. She stepped out and toweled herself off. The clock in her room showed that she still had nearly an hour until supper. Exhaustion overcame her and she put on her pantalettes and slipped on her nightgown that the maid had hung in the garderobe.

Her shawl hung next to the nightgown. She pulled it off the hanger and draped it around her shoulders, then sat on a settee in the sitting area by the fireplace. Normally, she would have wanted to dress and explore this magnificent a house a bit before supper, but her lack of sleep and the tension of her escape caught up with her.

A light breeze stirred outside, wafting in through the open French doors. The summer evening was comfortable and mild. Violette put her head back and closed her eyes, just for a minute ...

Chapter Five

Ethan sipped his wine, staring at Violette's empty seat. She was very late for supper, and he sighed, biting back a pang of disappointment.

Mason entered and bowed. "My lord, Charlotte informs me that our guest has fallen asleep. She went in to wake her and the young lady opened her eyes, stared blankly for a moment, closed them, and turned right back over. Apparently, she hadn't really awoken at all."

Ethan nodded. Of course she would be absolutely exhausted. He doubted she'd slept between the time of her engagement party and her early morning escape. If he'd been in her position, his nerves would be frayed to ribbons. "She's had a long journey. Let her rest."

"Very good, my lord." Mason bowed again and retreated, leaving Ethan alone again. He took another sip of wine, disturbed at the nagging sense of disappointment that persisted.

He finished his meal in solitude, finding himself also missing his brother's company. Charlie was a good companion, almost always in good spirits and ready with a kind word, quite a miracle in light of everything that had happened to him. Even though Ethan was only a few years Charlie's senior, he couldn't help the strong sense of protectiveness he felt toward him. He would have thought the instinct would have calmed down, considering he

was thirty-eight now and Charlie had just passed his thirty-fifth birthday. But the feeling was as strong as ever, especially now that there was a young woman whom he sensed would be good for his brother.

He rose from the table, intending to return to his study and read for a while before retiring. However, as soon as he reached the main hall, an overpowering urge to see Violette overcame him. He stood quietly, debating the wisdom of doing such a thing. His desire to see her won out, and he found himself walking up the stairs.

He told himself it was the kind thing to do in light of the fact that he had been the first man she'd given herself to. Elizabeth had been the only other woman whose virginity he'd taken. And yet, she'd taken his as well. He'd come to Violette as an older man with a lot more experience. Even though they weren't romantically involved, it didn't mean he couldn't look in on her and show some care.

The French doors were open in Violette's room. The gauzy curtains blew gently in the night breeze. The light from the hallway lit his way into the room. Her bed was empty. Charlotte had turned down the covers, obviously after Violette had fallen asleep.

He could hear her breath rising and falling gently in the direction of the sitting area. He padded quietly across the Oriental carpet to the settee.

She was there, sleeping peacefully. She wore a nightgown with a shawl draped over her shoulders. One delicate hand rested by her face and her silky mane of hair, though still pinned, was mussed. Stray wisps of it rioted around her cheeks.

The sight stirred Ethan, deeply, in a place he'd thought had died when Elizabeth left him. Violette was truly lovely. She was passionate. Spirited. Intelligent. Sweet.

Shut up, Ethan. He nearly started at the way his inner voice growled at him. In his mind, he'd already promised her to Charlie. But in his heart, he was falling in love ...

Violette sighed. She stirred and then continued her quiet sleep.

He came around the front of the settee and leaned over. Very carefully, he slid his hands underneath her and lifted her into his arms. The movement caused her to stir again. She murmured something unintelligible then sank against him, her cheek on his shoulder.

His heart gave a small jump. Her body was warm and soft in his arms, stirring potent memories. The scent of roses drifted into his senses, making him feel a touch drunk.

With Violette in his arms, he turned and carried her to the bed. He set her down with utmost care, her head on the pillow and slid his arms out from underneath her.

He pulled the covers over her up to her chin. Another dreamy sigh escaped her.

Ethan stood in the shadowy darkness, watching her, listening to her quiet breathing. The memory of her soft skin, the moist warm crevice between her thighs, her lush breasts, assaulted him. Before he could weaken completely and climb into the bed with her, he turned on his heel and strode from her bedroom, closing the door behind him.

* * * * *

“Welcome home, Sir Charles.”

“Thank you, Mason. I trust you’re well?”

The butler nodded as he closed the front door behind them. “Fine, sir. Thank you.”

“Any word from my brother this evening?” Charlie asked the butler as Mason closed the front door behind him. The Hazletons had asked him to stay the night and return home the following morning, but Charlie preferred the comfort of his own home. Besides, he enjoyed painting in the wee hours of the morning, the time of day in which he could also be assured that Ethan wouldn’t catch him practicing walking.

“I’m right here, Charlie.”

Charlie looked up to see Ethan descending the main staircase. He smiled at his elder brother. “That’s good service.”

Ethan grinned. “I aim to please.”

He returned his brother's smile, glad that he was home early. "I didn't expect you to be home so soon."

As Ethan neared the bottom of the steps, however, Charlie saw the furrow in his brow. He'd seen that look on his face too many times not to know that something was troubling Ethan. "It's good to see you."

"And you." Ethan approached him, his hand out-held. "Something's come up that brought me home sooner than I'd expected. In fact, I wish to discuss it with you. How about a brandy in my study?"

Charlie grasped his hand in a firm handshake. "Of course." Wheeling down the hallway to Ethan's study, he didn't tell Ethan that, at present, he could climb slowly to the second floor with a cane. He knew Ethan would probably be hurt to know he'd kept his walking a secret, but he also feared that once Ethan knew he could walk, he'd press him to re-enter society, something he wasn't ready to do.

Ethan walked alongside his brother's chair down the hall to his study. He held the door open for Charlie and closed it behind him. He went to the tray where he kept the brandy and poured two snifters, handing one to his brother. "Cheers." He clinked his glass against Charlie's.

"Cheers."

They each took a sip before Charlie set his glass on one thigh and looked at Ethan. "So, what is it that's brought you back early? Was Violette the witch we'd hoped she'd be?"

Ethan cleared his throat and looked down into his glass. "Actually, Charlie, Violette Poole is nothing short of magnificent."

Charlie heard the little catch in his brother's voice, a sound he'd not heard since Ethan's days with Elizabeth. "You've piqued my curiosity terribly, Ethan. Please tell me."

His brother heaved a deep sigh, his gaze still resting on the ruby-colored liquid in his glass. "All right. It turns out that Martin Poole tricked her into coming to England by making

her believe he wanted a relationship with her. She arrived here and found herself engaged to Graves. She ran away from them in the wee hours of the morning after the engagement party. Poole asked me to look for her when I arrived at their home for breakfast.”

Charlie’s pulse quickened slightly. “Good God, what a situation!”

Ethan looked up at him. “You don’t know the half of it yet.” He sighed again. “I found her. In Madame DuChamps’s brothel. Violette was about to become the madam’s virgin offering this very night.”

Charlie stared at him. “My God, Ethan. That’s unbelievable! And you bought her out?”

Ethan nodded. “I did.”

“Amazing, Ethan. That’s amazing.” He took a sip of brandy. “So, you removed her from Madame DuChamps’s and ...?”

“And I brought her here. She’s asleep in a bedroom upstairs. She was utterly exhausted, the poor thing.”

A flush of pride in his brother welled within Charlie. Ethan had never been one to bow to the rich and powerful. Of course, it helped that he was rich and powerful himself. Yet, at the same time, he’d always admired Ethan’s refusal to be cowed or ordered around, no matter what it could cost him. And this move could cost him dearly. “Ethan, that was very brave of you. Miss Poole must have been frantic and terrified.” He noticed a tinge of admiration for Violette Poole as well, taking such a risk to escape her fate.

Ethan nodded. “She was. You can imagine when I showed up at the brothel, she immediately thought I was there to drag her back to her father. Which, of course, I had no intention of doing.”

Charlie took another sip of brandy, glad for the first time that he’d been working on walking again. He didn’t want Miss Poole to pity him. “So, when do I have the pleasure of meeting her?”

“Tomorrow morning, of course. Just so you know, the staff have been introduced to her as Viola Carrick, a long lost cousin come to stay with us a while. I still haven’t come up with a reason, however, that she has come to us unchaperoned.”

Charlie nodded, a grin tugging at his lips. “Of course, I will keep that all in mind.” He watched Ethan look into his glass again, absently sloshing the brandy around before taking a deep pull on it. The simple movement and the heaviness tugging at his brother’s features alerted him to the fact that Ethan wasn’t telling him everything.

But Ethan didn’t have to say it in words. Charlie suspected what it was. He’d known his brother too long and too deeply not to. Ethan had probably made love to the girl. At the very least, he was developing feelings for her.

“Charlie, I’ve something to ask of you.”

He looked at Ethan, urged on by the tone of his voice. “What is it?”

“I was hoping you could spend time with Violette. Keep her company. She could use a friend.”

A strange curl of heat passed through his gut, another telltale sign that Ethan had other motives for his seemingly simple request. “It seems to me she already has a friend in you, Ethan. After all, you’re hiding her from Poole and Graves at great risk to your own position and reputation.”

Ethan’s face darkened. “Are you saying you won’t do as I ask?”

“Of course I’m not saying that. I’m happy to extend the hand of friendship to the girl. All I ask is, how can you be certain she’d want me as a friend?”

Ethan furrowed his brow. “You’re being pedantic, Charlie.”

He laughed softly. “I’m sorry. I’ll do my best. She probably won’t trust easily, considering everything she’s been through.”

“That much is true. But I think you’ll find her to be a sweet, personable young woman. You’re an amiable fellow. I think you two will enjoy each other’s company.”

The sound of resignation coloring Ethan's voice roused his suspicions. Ethan was a bit too anxious to bring him and Miss Poole together. Something had *definitely* happened between his brother and Violette Poole.

Charlie took another sip of brandy. "I suppose you're right, Ethan."

For several moments, he and Ethan sat in companionable silence, sipping their brandies. Finally, Charlie drained the last sip from his glass and set it down on the table. He was eager to go to his studio and practice walking. He was nearly strong enough to leave his chair and use a cane full time. The biggest problem would be revealing his ability to Ethan. A pang of guilt shot through him. "I'm going to do some sketches before turning in. Why don't you get some rest?"

Ethan sighed and set down his glass. "I believe I will. Good night."

Charlie smiled at his brother and gave him a good-natured mock salute. He turned and rolled his chair from the study, down the hall and across the foyer to the wing of the house that held his studio and bedroom.

The hour was quite late, and the staff had all presumably retired, including Mason, who was always the last to oversee that the house had been closed down properly for the night. An air of stillness settled over the large dwelling, and as Charlie rolled down the hallway, he could hear his own memories of the lavish balls and parties his and Ethan's parents used to hold in these rooms.

That had been a long time ago, when he and Ethan had been young and full of hope for their lives. Since then, their parents had passed away from illnesses, and he and his brother had been through war, lost women they loved, and had their hearts wrung in agony. Life was very different now.

And yet, when he'd listened to Ethan's story about Violette Poole, he'd heard that sound in Ethan's voice. Something that had lain dormant in his brother for so long had sounded as if it were coming back to life.

Not to mention that when Ethan had told him the young woman was in the house, his own pulse had quickened and he'd found himself very anxious to meet her and glad that he'd been walking. He hadn't even met the girl yet and already, her presence in their lives had wrought changes.

Charlie rolled into his studio at the end of the hall. His bedroom was on the other side so he wouldn't have to deal with the stairs. He closed the door behind him and wheeled to the leather sofa at the other end of the room. He leaned over, retrieving his canes from where they were propped against the wall next to the sofa and used them to propel himself from the chair.

From there, he proceeded to do his rounds of the studio. The room was very large, having once been part of a ballroom back in the days of lavish parties with musicians and flowing champagne. Moving about with the cane was getting easier, especially since he did exercises every day to maintain his upper body strength.

Tonight, however, knowing that Violette Poole was upstairs, asleep in one of the bedrooms of his home, Charlie felt an extra wave of determination. He made two rounds of the large room until he returned to the end of the room with the sofa. Next to it on the table, Mason had left him his nightly plate of sandwiches and pot of tea. Charlie looked at it, making a silent decision that he would have none of it until he'd practiced walking with only one cane.

Chapter Six

Two pairs of hands caressed her bare skin. One skated tenderly over her breasts, while the other slid down between her thighs, caressing the heated moistness of her sex. She moaned softly. A pair of masculine lips caught the sound while another man dappled kisses on the supple flesh of her inner thigh. A gentle pressure pushed her onto her back, gently spreading her legs apart.

The kiss on her lips deepened. He slid his tongue against hers, his hand tightening sensuously on her breast. Fingertips slipped inside her, in and out, caressing the tightness of her sheath. Pleasure blinded her, made her unable to think. They were caressing, kissing, tasting her until the waves of bliss exploded ...

Violette's eyes popped open. She was still breathing heavily, though her consciousness registered she'd been dreaming. The ghostly caresses, full of erotic pleasure and promises of more, whispered over her skin before slowly fading.

Her breathing rose and fell, her breasts tingling with the memory of the dream. She hadn't seen their faces in the dream, but their touch, the way they stroked her, with unleashed desire had made her feel so loved, so wanted ...

For a moment she forgot where she was. Her body clenched, thinking that Graves would soon come for her. She looked wildly around. The room in which she lay was dark. Slowly, her memory returned. She'd fallen asleep on the settee. In the home of Ethan Carrick.

Yet, here she was in her bed, in her nightgown, her shawl still wrapped around her shoulders. Someone must have picked her up and moved her.

The captain.

She gasped, jolted fully awake. She'd missed supper! "Oh no!" she cried aloud softly, throwing back the covers. She'd only meant to sleep for a minute. How rude he must think she is after everything he'd done to help her. Perhaps it wasn't too late to go find him and apologize.

She slipped from the bed, pulling her shawl more tightly around herself, and padded barefoot to the door. Venturing into the shadowy hallway, she made her way to the stairs.

She stood at the top of the grand staircase, listening for any sounds, but the house sat in deep quiet. Still hoping it wasn't too late, she descended to the bottom and stood in the foyer, again listening. The downstairs was nearly as dark as upstairs, but for a small lamp burning in a sconce on the wall. Certainly if a light still burned, it was because the captain was still up and about somewhere in the house.

She went in the direction of one of the hallways that branched off the foyer. A wedge of light stole from under a doorway down at the very end. She brightened. The captain was up, presumably in his study. She hoped he wouldn't be too upset with her.

The hallway seemed to go on forever, but she finally reached the door, pausing in front of it with sudden indecision. Perhaps she shouldn't disturb the captain.

A noise sounded from within, a muffled sound, as if someone were scraping something across the floor. She froze, listening, trying to distinguish what it could be. She caught her

breath. The noise was moving closer to the door. She knew she should turn around and head back to her room, but a mixture of apprehension and curiosity left her rooted to her spot.

The door handle was turning. The light in the hallway began to spill through the widening crack as the door slowly opened.

Violette stood back, watching as a man's brawny frame filled the doorway. She heard his breath catch as their gazes locked. In the split seconds that followed, she stared at him, taking in the dark blond hair, short around the sides, parted in the middle, soft locks of it spilling over his forehead. He appeared close in age to the captain, but this certainly wasn't the captain, in spite of the strong resemblance in the ruggedly handsome set of his jaw.

The light in the room behind him silhouetted a broad chest and shoulders, straining against a white undershirt. He wore suspenders and trousers and leaned on a cane, breathing heavily, as if from some physical exertion. His eyebrows rose and his sensuously masculine lips parted in surprise. "Oh, hello." His voice held a note of breathy wonder.

Violette's heart crashed violently. She'd intruded upon the captain's brother, Sir Charles. She stepped back. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to ... I'll go."

"No. Please don't."

The plea in his tone stopped her. She clutched at her shawl. Sir Charles's blue gaze filled her with the sudden, uncomfortable awareness that she wore only her nightgown with nothing on underneath it but her pantalettes. For the second time today, she met a man while practically naked.

A tiny grin tugged at his lips. "You're not intruding, if that's what you think. I just wasn't expecting to see anyone here at this hour."

Violette continued to stare at him. He had the same masculine good looks as his brother, and his earnest gaze reminded her of the captain's kind demeanor. Sir Charles's look, however, was even more penetrating, making her feel he could read her every thought.

“You must be Miss Poole,” he said when she didn’t respond. He leaned on his cane and extended his free hand. “Charles Carrick. Ethan’s younger brother. I’m very pleased to meet you.”

Gingerly, she accepted his hand. It closed around hers, flooding her with sudden warmth. His touch was gentle, like his voice, yet also strong, very much like the captain’s. “The pleasure is mine, Sir Charles.”

He chuckled softly and squeezed her hand gently before releasing it. “I see my brother’s been telling you about me.” His smile faded. “I don’t put much stock in titles, Miss Poole. I was just doing what was right. Please call me Charlie, if you would.”

Violette looked up at him. His invitation to call him by a familiar name warmed her. The captain hadn’t asked her to call him Ethan, even though he’d made love to her. “Only if you call me Violette,” she said softly. “I don’t like the name Poole.”

Charlie’s smile returned. “Done then. We will not stand on ceremony.” He paused. “Forgive my lack of manners,” he said after several moments’ silence, “Would you like to come in? I happen to know you missed supper. Perhaps you’re hungry. Mason left me sandwiches and tea. I’ll never finish them all myself.”

The mention of food made her aware that her last meal had been at Madame DuChamps’s the previous morning. However, it also reminded her of her need to apologize to the captain. “I was actually looking for the captain, to tell him I’m sorry for missing supper. It was so very rude of me.”

Charlie gazed at her, his blue eyes radiating a sudden compassion that nearly made her eyes tear up. “It wasn’t rude at all, Violette. I spoke to him earlier when I came home, and he completely understood how tired you were. He’s actually retired for the night.” He fell silent, still watching her. “So ... would you join me?”

Violette pulled her shawl tightly around her. If she declined his offer, she’d have to go back to her dark room alone. Charlie’s company offered warmth and someone to talk to. She

found herself drawn to him, as if she'd known him for a long time. She wanted nothing more than to be there, where the demons of her fears couldn't haunt her. She nodded. "I would like that very much, thank you."

He smiled, appearing exceedingly pleased. "Splendid. This way." He moved slowly aside, gesturing to the interior of the room.

Violette entered, her gaze sweeping over what had obviously been a ballroom but now appeared to serve as an art studio. Canvases sat stacked against the walls, draped with sheets. An easel holding another canvas, sat facing another wall. Various tables held jars of paints, palettes, and brushes.

"Have a seat." Charlie had followed her to the other end of the room and indicated the leather sofa. "And please ignore the mess as best you can."

She passed by him and sank down onto one of the cushions. Folding her hands in her lap, she watched Charlie maneuver himself into his wheelchair. Only then did she remember what the captain had told her about his brother not wanting to walk.

She must have had a questioning look, for when he was seated and raised his gaze to hers, a sheepish look stole into his eyes. He wheeled over to her. "Knowing my brother as I do, he probably told you I don't walk at all. Is that correct?"

She nodded. "Perhaps he wanted to stir my sympathies?"

He shook his head, his eyes both solemn and guilty. "No. Ethan is not conniving that way." He poured her a cup of tea, splashed in milk at her request, and put two finger sandwiches on the saucer next to the cup.

She accepted it gratefully. She sipped her tea and picked up a sandwich. "I don't wish to pry," she said softly.

"He doesn't know." Charlie looked down at his hands. "I've been practicing for about six months now, every night at about this time." He lifted his gaze to hers. "I've never kept a

secret from him before in my life, until this.” He sighed and raked a large hand through his dark gold hair. “I know he’ll be hurt when I do tell him.”

Violette swallowed the bite she’d been chewing. “You must have your reasons,” she answered gently. “You don’t strike me as a shallow person.”

Her words seemed to sift through him and a bit of the emotional pain in his eyes melted away.

“Yes, I do have reasons. I’m afraid that if he knew, he’d push me to go back into society.”

Violette saw from his expression and from the tone in his voice that going back into society was something he clearly did *not* want. Her heart ached for him. “Are you certain he would do that?”

Charlie sighed. “No, I’m not. It’s just that I do know he’s dreadfully concerned for me. I try to reassure him, but he continues to worry.”

“Perhaps his concern would lessen if he knew you were walking.”

He looked at her, his blue eyes pensive. After a moment, a tiny smile appeared on his lips. “You know, you’re right. I’m so close to him I absolutely hadn’t even considered that. What a terrible oversight.” His smile widened into a sheepish grin. “Funny how a man can study Latin and literature at Oxford, and completely lack common sense.”

Violette giggled. “I’m sure you don’t completely lack common sense.”

His grin widened and mirth came into his eyes. “You don’t know me yet.”

A flush of warmth spread through her, and she found herself wanting to know him. He was funny and sweet and kind. As well as unbelievably handsome.

She watched him pour himself a cup of tea and take a couple of sandwiches. Together, they ate and drank companionably, and Charlie answered the questions she put to him about his artwork.

“I apologize for knowing so very little about art. You paint beautifully, though.”

“Thank you. Although I doubt any of my work is ready for the Louvre.”

The mention of the museum in Paris, where her mother had taken her, sent a wave of sadness through her.

Charlie’s brow furrowed in concern. “Oh dear, I’m afraid I’ve said something wrong.”

Violette set her empty teacup on the table. “*Non*, you haven’t. Your mention of *Le Louvre* brought back memories of my mother. She took me there once when I was younger. I miss her.”

He nodded. “Yes, I understand missing someone only too well. I’m very sorry for your loss, Violette.” He was silent a moment, sipping his tea.

“Thank you.”

“My parents were great admirers of your mother,” he continued softly. “They went many times to the Theatre Royal to see her perform. She must have been an amazing woman.”

Her eyes now crowded with hot tears. She felt as if a wall of emotion she’d been suppressing was eroding quickly under Charlie’s kindness. Something about him made her let her guard down. She prayed she didn’t completely break down in front of him. “She was.”

“I imagine she was brave and intelligent.”

She looked at him. “She was those things. But how did you know?”

“Because she raised such an intelligent and brave daughter.”

She stared at him. His words seeped into her, pulling yet more bricks from her wall of strength. “Brave?”

He nodded. Setting down his cup, he wheeled closer to her, stopping right in front of her. “Yes. Brave. Truly. I admire your courage for running away the way you did, especially in a strange land. Many women would allow themselves to be taken in by the glamour and power that Graves could offer them. I think you want something more.”

That did it. Before she could gather her wits, the tears slipped from her eyes. All the sadness and pain she'd kept to herself for so long, the hurt and betrayal by her father, and her grief, began to pour out. "I'm sorry," she choked, mortified at her display yet unable to stop.

"Don't be sorry, Violette."

Through her tears, she heard the creak of his chair followed by the pressure of him sinking onto the sofa beside her. Strong arms wrapped around her, pulling her against him.

She felt enveloped in warmth and comfort. Her cheek rested against his chest, a wall of masculine strength. She succumbed and let her tears flow, wetting the white cotton of his undershirt. His scent, a blend of spicy aftershave and man seeped into her senses, comforting her. His hand moved along her hair, caressing her tenderly, as if she were a child.

"It's all right, sweetheart," he crooned. "Let it out."

Charlie couldn't believe he'd said those things to her. Her warm presence and sweet nature had loosened his lips and all those words had come pouring out of him. Now he felt as if he'd dredged up her memories and made her cry.

To make matters worse, Violette was so warm and soft in his arms. His heart ached for her as she cried. Her sobs seemed to emanate from deep within her. Grief was something he understood very well and he held her, loving the silky feel of her beautiful red hair under his fingertips.

It didn't matter that Ethan had asked him to befriend her. Just upon meeting her, she'd enchanted him. Violette Poole was delightful, smart, and beautiful. He would have wanted her in his life of his own accord.

A long time passed and finally her sobs calmed down. She clung to him, practically curled up in his lap. He held her close, continuing his caress on her hair, sensing her deep hunger to be loved.

If it was possible to fall in love with someone this quickly, then he was falling in love. Perhaps he was ready, like a fruit so ripe it falls off the tree at the slightest breeze.

“Is that better now?” he asked, pushing her hair gently back from her tearstained face.

Even with her eyes red and puffy from crying and her skin blotched pink, she was lovely. His heart fluttered. Down below, his groin tightened with burgeoning want. Her lips, swollen from crying, invited his kiss.

He fought back his desire. If she’d been with his brother, then he didn’t want to come between them.

She nodded. “*Oui*. Thank you so much.”

“I’m sorry. I think I said things that brought up your pain.”

To his relief she shook her head. “*Non*. You did no such thing. I’m the one who is embarrassed.”

He smoothed her hair back again, biting back the overwhelming drive to kiss her soft lips. “Don’t be embarrassed, Violette. Please. I know you’ve suffered so much.”

A sad smile curved her lips. “So have you.”

“I know. But I’m older, and I’ve had Ethan to lean on.”

Her lower lip trembled and more tears slipped from her eyes. “I’ve felt so alone,” she whispered.

“You don’t have to be alone now.”

“Thank you, Charlie.” She put her head against his chest again, snuggling closer.

He held her close, breathing in her flowery scent. A lock of her hair brushed against his jaw, sending a thrill through his body.

Mingled with the sweetness of holding Violette, however, was a heavy tinge of sadness. There was almost no doubt in his mind that Ethan had been with her. There was no possible

way his brother could have resisted her if their circumstance had afforded an opportunity for intimacy. The only thing that kept Charlie from kissing her was that possibility.

He continued to cradle her in his arms, listening to her breathing grow softer, steadier. Before long, he realized she'd fallen asleep. He took a small pillow, set it on his lap and gently lowered her head to it. He looked down at her, mesmerized by her fiery lashes resting on her pale cheeks. Gently, he stroked her hair, content just to watch her sleep.

Chapter Seven

“Where the hell is she, Poole?” Graves towered threateningly over him, causing his pulse to race.

“I swear to you I don’t know. I’m working as hard as I can to get her back. Ethan Carrick is the best.”

Graves’s brow furrowed deeply, and his dark eyes glittered with a hint of madness. “It’s already been an entire day, and I no longer believe you.”

Martin Poole stared up at him. “Graves, I am as worried about finding her as you are. For goodness’ sake, I promised her to you, my only daughter.”

Graves drummed his fingers on the desktop. “Yes, I thought so at first. But you’re a bit cleverer than that, my friend. You stole a woman from me once. I don’t put it past you to do it again.”

Martin stared at him. He’d known that Graves had been as taken with Sandrine as he’d been. They’d both visited her backstage and wooed her. But for some reason, she’d chosen him over Graves, in spite of the fact that his competitor had been taller and more handsomer. However, he’d never imagined that Graves had held a grudge all these years. A chill ran up

his spine. The realization dawned in his mind that for Graves, marriage to Violette was more than the result of attraction, or the desire for political or economic advantages.

“Very convenient of you to have someone who hates me search for your daughter,” Graves went on. “Then you can hand her off to him without the embarrassment of a scandal. Perhaps he’s made a bit higher offer for her than I have.”

“There’s been no other *offer*, as you put it. And as far as hating you, Ethan Carrick doesn’t even know you.”

Graves chuckled, an eerie, crazy sound. “You’re not that naïve really, are you, Poole? He doesn’t have to know me.” Graves strode over to the liquor cart and poured himself a whiskey, which he downed in one gulp. “I’ve heard the talk. Your friend Carrick is an outspoken man. He blames me for what happened to him and his brother in India. He believes that my political activities led to the Mutiny.” He poured another whiskey, tossed it back, and slammed down the glass, glaring at Martin as he did so. “So, are you going to confess, or am I going to have to have it beaten out of you?”

Martin Poole catapulted from his desk chair. “Good God, man, no need for such an action. I swear to you with my last breath I’ve no such scheme at work. You know as well as I do that Violette appeared absolutely pleased with her arrangement. There was no sign that she would run away. And yet even the detective who came in at your behest affirmed everything Carrick told us when he searched her room.”

“Yes, well, even so, I don’t trust you. I’m beginning to think you’re going to keep your daughter away from me, as you once did her mother.”

Martin sighed. Yes, Sandrine had preferred him over Graves. Yes, it was a reality that confounded both men. However, he’d never thought of Sandrine’s preference as something he’d done deliberately to the man.

“I’m putting my own men on the search, Poole,” Graves went on. “They’re going to pay your friend a little visit if he doesn’t turn up with her in the next twelve hours. You might

want to send him a little note to that effect. And, you might tell him that I don't care if he's sampled Violette for himself. That is of no consequence to me. I want her and I'll have her, ruined or not. But if he knows what's good for him, he'll deliver her if he has her. Or you're both ruined!"

With that, Graves whirled on his heel and slammed out of Poole's study, leaving him in a cold sweat.

* * * * *

Charlie moaned. He sank further into the cushions of the sofa, his head back. Violette had opened his trousers and was stroking his erection. The pressure of her hand increased, sliding deliciously up and down the rigid shaft.

His chest rose and fell heavily. She had him panting more and more with each slide of her graceful hand on his cock. Each movement sent shards of pleasure crashing through him. The harder she squeezed, the faster he hurtled toward the blissful explosion ...

His eyes popped open. He was breathing heavily, his lips parted, gulping for air. Daylight streamed through the openings in the curtains, assaulting his sleep-heavy eyes.

The pressure on his groin remained. He looked down.

Violette lay sleeping on the pillow in his lap. She must have moved in her sleep, pushing down on his cock, which had responded with a raging erection.

He exhaled heavily and laid his head back, not wanting to disturb her. One of his hands rested on the arm of the sofa and he resisted the hungry urge to caress her hair, as he had while watching her sleep. Somehow, in the light of day, such an action seemed like one that would disturb her rest.

A tiny smile came to his lips. This was the first night in his life he'd spent with a woman and could honestly say the next morning that nothing untoward had happened.

The sudden sound of a throat clearing snapped him to attention. He recognized the owner of the voice. Blinking, he found himself staring back at Ethan, who stood a few feet in front of him, one eyebrow raised quizzically.

With a quick reflex, Charlie raised a finger to his lips and then pointed to a stool.

Ethan took the direction and removed the vase of flowers from the stool that Charlie had been using for a still life. He lifted the stool, quietly setting it on the floor a few feet away and sat down. Silently, he waited with Charlie for Violette to awaken.

They didn't have to wait long. As soon as the rising sun's rays landed on her face through the window, Violette stirred and opened her eyes. She started, as if she'd forgotten where she was, and looked up, her gaze directly meeting Charlie's.

Her blue-green eyes lit up when she saw him, but just as quickly a cloud passed over her pale face and she frowned. She sat up swiftly, pulling her shawl around her. "I'm sorry. What have I done? The captain will hate me."

"The captain will not hate you," Ethan said gently.

Her gaze whipped up to his and sorrow creased her soft skin. "I didn't mean ..." she gestured to Charlie. "We didn't ... I was looking for you ... to apologize. I ... I thought this was your study. But we talked. I was crying and fell asleep again."

Ethan leaned forward on his seat. "You needn't explain, Violette. I know how exhausted you were. As far as you and Charlie, in truth, as you know, I was hoping you two would hit it off."

Violette's brow furrowed. Locks of her red hair rioted about her cheeks and the sleepiness remained in her face.

Charlie felt his own heart melt at the sight and sensed a similar reaction in his brother as he witnessed the exchange between them.

“Charlie is very kind,” she said quietly. Her bottom lip trembled slightly, and Charlie did not miss the shadow of longing that passed through her gaze as she watched Ethan. “You both have been so good to me.”

A wave of intense affection passed through Charlie, and he picked up her hand, squeezing it gently. “Violette, everything will come out all right.” He turned to Ethan. “It’s a lovely morning, Ethan, wouldn’t you say? Perhaps you’ve already ordered breakfast to be served on the terrace?”

Ethan nodded.

“Good.” He returned to Violette. “Violette, why don’t you get dressed and meet us out there? If you don’t have enough dresses, I know that Ethan will order some things for you. I don’t imagine you could have carried much with you yesterday in your flight.”

When he looked into her eyes, she was staring back at him, her soft full lips slightly parted in a moué of surprise. “That is so. But you needn’t buy me dresses.”

Charlie squeezed her hand again, overwhelmed with the need to indulge her. She deserved to be fussed over and treasured. “Tosh! Consider it already done. Now go on. Ethan and I have some brotherly matters to discuss. We’ll join you soon.”

She looked at him a moment longer, her aqua-hued eyes melting. She glanced at Ethan, her need for his approval painfully evident.

To Charlie’s relief, his brother nodded. “Whatever you need, Violette.”

A shy, yet relieved smile curved her lips. “Thank you so much, Captain.”

Charlie released her hand, biting back a pang of disappointment. He hadn’t wanted to let her go. He watched her slip off the sofa, pause in front of Ethan as if waiting for him to embrace her, and then pad softly out of the room.

When she’d left, closing the large door behind her, Charlie turned a disapproving glare on his elder brother. “What kind of nonsense is this, Ethan? The girl gives you her virginity,

and you don't even ask her to call you by your Christian name?" He sat back, his arms folded across his chest. "I'd never thought you to be that cold."

Ethan's eyes widened and his face darkened. "She told you about us? About what happened at DuChamps's?"

A pain sliced through Charlie's heart, something he recognized as envy. "She told me nothing of the sort. Violette's a lady through and through. It was just a hunch. A hunch you've now verified."

Ethan looked down with an air of humility. "Your empathic abilities have become frightening, Charles."

Charlie nodded. He'd always had this strange gift of reading people's thoughts and feelings, but strangely, since he'd returned from India, his ability had only intensified. It was this sensitivity that had contributed to his dire need for seclusion during his convalescence. During the past seven years, however, this strange ability had only made the prospect of returning to society increasingly less desirable.

Ethan sighed and shoved a hand through his hair. "She wouldn't leave with me ... unless I ... *ruined* her," he murmured. "She was terrified I'd force her back to her father and Graves, but she believed that I wouldn't do so if I'd compromised her."

In spite of himself, Charlie chuckled. "In other words, she raped you."

"Not quite."

"I didn't think so. Under the circumstances, I can understand her position." His smile faded. "However, she wasn't prepared for the aftermath, was she? She had no idea of the soul-searing need to be held and loved afterward. She couldn't have imagined you would become a part of her the way you did. Nor were you prepared for such a bond, although I'm certain you were somewhat reluctant to fulfill her request, knowing that affection between you was possible."

Ethan stared at him. "Uncanny."

Charlie shrugged. "I didn't ask for this so-called gift."

Ethan's shoulders sagged. "I know. In any case, you and she are much more fitting for each other. I ... wanted her to go to you. I still do."

Charlie tilted his head, studying Ethan. "Yes, I can hear that. But it's not completely true, either. I see it in you. You're falling in love with her."

Ethan stared back at him, his lips slightly parted. His brow furrowed. "You know, Charlie, I don't need to share your level of empathic ability to see the same has happened to you."

Ethan's voice held no anger or jealousy. Yet he did sound sad.

Charlie sighed. "Yes, it has. I won't lie to you. But I won't interfere, either."

Ethan smoothed his palms on the thighs of his trousers. "Well, then, we've reached an impasse, haven't we?"

"What kind of impasse?"

"You're not going to interfere between me and Violette. And I'm not going to interfere with you and her."

A sliver of anger traveled up Charlie's spine. He'd always disliked Ethan's stubborn streak. "Christ, Ethan, where does that leave poor Violette? Can't you see the girl is hungry for love? And so are you. You wouldn't be acting this way otherwise."

Ethan's eyebrows rose. "What way?"

"Cold and stupid."

Ethan's lip curled. Suddenly, however, the anger drained from his features and he laughed softly.

Charlie's tension broke, too, and he shared in his brother's laughter.

"You're right, as usual, Charlie. I'm sorry."

Charlie's smile faded, and his heart pounded suddenly. The situation at hand offered the perfect moment to reveal his secret to Ethan. "What if I tell you something that will so thoroughly anger you toward me that you'll want to keep Violette away from me and be with her yourself?"

Ethan's mirth passed, and his mouth formed a grim line. "What the hell are you talking about? What could you possibly tell me that would put such a wedge between us?"

Charlie gripped the arm of the sofa. "I can walk."

Ethan propelled from the stool. "You what?"

He cleared his throat and leveled a steady gaze on his brother's shocked face. "I said, I can walk. I've been practicing for six months now. I'm able to walk with a cane."

Several emotions passed through Ethan's features. Slowly, he lowered himself back onto the stool. His dark eyes filled with unshed tears, and he looked up at Charlie. "Thank God." His voice escaped in a near whisper. He sat quietly for another few moments until a look of hurt squeezed his eyes. "Charlie, why didn't you tell me? As far as I know, you've never kept a secret from me."

Charlie's heart wrung painfully. "You're right, I haven't done. However, I was afraid that if you knew, you'd push me to resume a 'normal' life. But I can't, Ethan. This bizarre, God-awful sensitivity of mine makes it utterly agonizing to be around people. I feel all their pain and sorrow, and it makes me want to curl up and die. Just the little while I spent talking to Violette made me feel so awfully for her. What a sweetheart she is." He looked at Ethan, his hands out in a pleading gesture. "I hope you'll forgive me. I was wrong not to tell you. It was actually Violette who helped me realize how wrongheaded it was not to be truthful with you."

Ethan looked at him questioningly, and Charlie grinned, feeling sheepish. "Last night, in the wee hours," Charlie went on, "I was on my cane, about to venture into the hallway.

When I opened the door, she was standing there.” His grin widened. “She caught me red-handed.”

Ethan chuckled although his expression was still somewhat pained.

“Ethan, I can’t tell you enough how sorry I am.”

Ethan nodded. “I understand, believe it or not. I have pushed you at times and haven’t been sensitive enough to this ‘gift’ of yours. It sounds like it is, at times, as much of a curse.”

“Yes.” He fell silent, sitting quietly with Ethan for several moments. “So, about Violette?”

Ethan’s gaze shot up. “Yes, about Violette.”

Before Charlie could respond, someone knocked at the door. At Charlie’s call, it opened and Mason stepped in, holding a salver with an envelope on it. He extended it toward Ethan. “Message for you, my lord,” he said quietly, moving toward them. “The messenger who delivered it urged me to express to you that this note must be read immediately and responded to.” He stopped by Ethan’s stool.

Ethan exchanged a look with Charlie and picked the note up. “Thank you, Mason. Tell him I’ll answer as soon as I’ve read it.”

Mason bowed. “Very good, my lord.”

As Mason retreated, Ethan slid the note from the envelope.

Charlie’s gut tightened. “Do you think it’s from Graves?”

“Perhaps. I left word with Poole yesterday that I was still searching for Violette.”

Charlie rubbed the morning growth on his chin and jaw and leaned forward in his seat, watching Ethan’s expression darken as he read. “I’m in terrible suspense, Ethan. Please tell me what it says.”

“All right.

“Dear Ethan, I do not know if you have found Violette or not, but I implore you, if you do find her, please keep her well-hidden. Protect her. I regret that my involvement with Graves has come to this terrible pass. I overestimated his character and did not understand his true motivations for wanting to marry Violette. He believes you have, indeed, found her and are keeping her from him. He wants her returned to him at all costs and does not care if she has been tainted during her time at large. He urged me to tell you that if you do not return her to him within the next twelve hours, he will come to your home and confront you himself. I do not know if this message has reached you or not, but I pray it has. I do hope one day to be able to explain to Violette all the reasons for my behavior with her and her mother and beg her forgiveness. Please, Ethan, I know that I have never been someone whom you’ve favored, but if you receive this message, please let me know whether or not you have found her and, if so, that she is safe.

Martin Poole”

Ethan fell silent and exhaled, resting his hand holding the note on one thigh. With the other hand, he raked his hair. “I don’t know what to make of this.”

Charlie looked at him, absorbing Martin Poole’s words. “Nor do I. He could be lying, using his plea to find out if you have Violette.”

Ethan nodded. “Of course. Then again, if he’s sincere, I hate to think of him worrying about her this way. However, he’s never given me reason in the past to believe he is sincere.”

“You simply must have him explain to you himself the reasons for his behavior, as he put it. Perhaps then you may ascertain whether he is telling the truth.”

Ethan sighed heavily. “Yes, that probably would help.”

Charlie looked at him. “What do you make of his statement about Graves, about how he wants her back at all costs and doesn’t care if she’s been ruined or not?”

“Lord, I don’t know.” He stared down at the floor. Suddenly, his gaze shot up, his dark eyes practically glowing.

Charlie could practically see the idea in his brother's mind, and his heart slammed in his chest. "I know what you're thinking, Ethan."

"Do you?"

He nodded. "Well, correct me if I'm wrong, but your reasoning is that if Graves isn't hindered by another man having ruined his bride, perhaps a second man having done so will."

"Honestly, Charlie, are you sure your true parents weren't gypsies with crystal balls or something?"

Charlie frowned at him. "The only crystal balls in this family are hanging between your legs. It's out of the question, Ethan."

"Are you saying you don't desire her?"

"You already know I do. But she's for you, truly. And well, even if she weren't, all she'd have to see is my scars and she'd run off screaming into the night."

"She's only done that once, and that was to get away from Graves. That shows her sanity. She wouldn't run from you. Give her more credit than that." He furrowed his brow. "Really, Charles, you're the natural born problem solver between the two of us. I'm surprised you didn't think of it first."

Charlie leveled a cool look at him. "Who said I didn't? You're the one who voiced it."

Ethan smiled. "It *would* solve certain problems, you know."

Charlie cocked an eyebrow. "Like what?"

"Well, perhaps we'd stop pestering each other to find a woman we could love. We already have. And we both approve of her for the other."

Charlie crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Wouldn't you feel horribly jealous and want to shoot me?"

Ethan's smile faded. "No, Charlie. Never. You're my dearest friend in the world."

Charlie looked at him. "Thank you. I feel the same about you. However, I don't think I could bear it if I disgusted her."

"I don't think you would. She doesn't strike me as superficial, not in the least."

"Even so, I can't risk it. As much as I would want to."

Ethan sighed. "I'm certain you're dead wrong. Well, we'll have to come up with an alternative then, until you see the truth."

Charlie's heart wrung painfully. He doubted that any woman could see the scars on his hip and leg and not be utterly horrified. He knew that Violette had found him handsome. That much was in her gaze when she looked at him. But desire, the way she desired Ethan, was quite another. No, he and Ethan would have to find another way.

He considered a moment before the perfect idea formed in his mind. He sat up straighter. "I've got it! You and Violette will pose in a most compromising position for a painting that I'll paint. We'll send it to Graves. When he sees that, he'll never want her back."

"A potentially brilliant plan, Charlie, but first of all, it's a confession to Graves that Violette is here. Moreover, if the painting should somehow get out into the public eye, Violette's reputation would be ground into the dust. I'm not willing to do that to her. Hearsay is one thing. Concrete proof of one's profligacy is quite another." He shook his head. "Profligate." He sounded as if he might choke on the word. "Violette is *not* that."

Charlie heard the tenderness in Ethan's voice when he spoke of Violette. His brother was truly protective of the girl. "You can't hide how you feel about her from me, Ethan, even though you do from her."

"Please don't say it out loud, Charlie. Not yet."

Charlie sighed. His heart still ached from Ethan's proposal of them both making love to Violette and of his own certainty that his scarring would disgust her. "Fine. As you wish." He reached for his cane. "In the meantime, we shouldn't keep her waiting out there, alone on

the terrace. At least we can propose to her our idea about the painting when we tell her about her father's letter. She should decide for herself what she wants to do."

He hoisted himself off the sofa and leaned on his cane. When he looked up, he caught Ethan staring at him, his dark eyes glistening. Fingers of guilt curled around his heart again. "I'm sorry, Ethan. I feel terrible for having deceived you."

"It does hurt," Ethan agreed. "But I understand. And it's wonderful to see you on your feet again." He stepped forward and put his hand out.

Charlie shook it firmly, smiling at him. "Come on then. Let's go see how Violette feels about our proposed regimen of ruination."

Chapter Eight

Violette sipped her tea, working to stop her hand from trembling. The Carricks' butler, Mason, stood nearby while she waited for the captain and Charlie to join her. In spite of her concerns, she couldn't help but enjoy the soft breeze and warm sunlight of the summer morning. Sparrows chirped and sang amongst the trees and shrubs of the garden. The only thing that marred her enjoyment of the pleasant surroundings was thoughts of the private discussion the captain and his brother were having. Her stomach tightened whenever she wondered what they were discussing.

She was the topic, no doubt. They were probably wondering what to do with her. She set the cup down in the saucer. What if they were deciding to give her back to her father? *Non*. Impossible. She had been ruined. Graves wouldn't want her, certainly.

She looked up at the old butler. "Do you know what is keeping them?"

"No, miss. I'm certain they'll be out presently. Would you care for more tea?"

"Yes, please."

Mason stepped forward and poured it for her.

"Thank you. Have you always worked here?"

The old man's white eyebrows rose. He was probably not used to being asked personal questions. "Yes, miss. My father was in service to the Carrick family, as was his father before him."

Violette looked at him. "That is amazing." She was certain that a tiny smile teased at the corner of the old man's mouth.

"I suppose so, miss."

Just then, she caught sight of the captain striding through the French doors. He handed Mason a note in an envelope. "Here's my answer to the letter."

Mason accepted the note with a small bow. "Very good, my lord. I'll see that he receives it immediately."

When Mason had gone back inside, the captain turned to her. "Hello, Violette." He seated himself and put his napkin on his lap. When he looked up, he must have read the concern on her face. "Don't worry, I'll tell you everything."

She nodded. "Where is Charlie?"

"He'll be out soon. He wanted to shave and make himself presentable."

Violette smiled, unable to suppress her gladness that Charlie was going to join them.

The captain studied her, a thoughtful expression in his handsome features.

She caught her breath. Every time she looked at him she was struck by how devastatingly masculine he was. The tender way he looked at her in this moment only made the effect more dazzling and her heart sped up.

"I'm glad you two like each other."

Her cheeks burned. "You're not angry with me?"

He shook his head. "No. Of course not." He poured himself a cup of tea and dropped several lumps of sugar into it.

Violette watched him stir and sip before he turned to her again.

“My brother told me about his walking. He told me you’d convinced him he was wrong to hide it.”

“I didn’t try to convince him of anything, captain.”

“Ethan.” He smiled at her, a somewhat apologetic look tingeing his dark eyes. “Please call me Ethan. I should have asked you to do so from the first.”

Her heart beat hard against her chest, and she put her hands on her lap to hide their trembling. Perhaps he did care for her, just a little ...

“Please, continue what you were saying.”

She looked at him. “He told me how worried you were for him, wanting him to go back into the world. I simply mentioned that perhaps you would feel less worried if you knew that he was walking. It was your fear that he’d given up on life that worried you, *non?*”

He sighed. “Yes, Violette, it was. That was very wise of you.”

“I hope you weren’t too hurt. I know he meant no harm.”

Ethan nodded. “I realize that. Yes, it did hurt to know he felt he couldn’t tell me. But I understand. I can be pushy with him at times.”

She chuckled. “Better that, I suppose, than if you never paid him any mind. Care is so much better.” She heard the sadness in her own voice and looked down, embarrassed.

“I’m sorry for what’s happened to you, Violette.” His voice was kind and caressed her like a soothing wave. She fought back sudden tears. What was it about Ethan and his brother that was breaking down the façade of calm she’d worked so hard to construct since *Maman* died?

“Thank you ... Ethan.”

He frowned. “Unfortunately, I must share with you a note I received from your father a little while ago. He held out a piece of folded paper. “Before you read it, however, I just want to reassure you that Charlie and I have been working on a solution and that we are here for you.”

She nodded, her heart thrashing in her chest as she picked the note from him. Slowly, she unfolded it and read. Her father's words burned into her mind. If she wasn't mistaken, he actually sounded contrite. She ached to believe him, for he sounded as if he loved her. But a lifetime of broken promises and cold absence would not dissolve in a moment and her defenses rose against Martin Poole.

She looked up at Ethan, momentarily stunned again by the tender, compassionate way he was regarding her. She took a deep breath. "I don't believe him," she murmured. "This is a trick, I'm certain of it. I cannot imagine he is sorry for all of this. He's trying to trick you into giving me back."

Ethan's face darkened, and his masculine lips straightened into a grim line. "I won't give you back, Violette. I've already given you my word about that, and I don't intend to break it."

Violette looked at the note again. Her father's words about Graves stood out this time. So, according to him, Graves wanted her, ruined or not. She heaved a deep sigh. Personally, she wasn't sorry about giving herself to Ethan, even though Graves, apparently, didn't care. She did, however, experience a sharp pang of regret that she'd demanded that Ethan do something he hadn't wanted to do, all for nothing. "I'm sorry, Ethan." Her voice escaped in a tight whisper.

"For what, Violette?"

"For forcing you yesterday. For demanding of you that you ruin me. You ... didn't want to. You felt it was wrong. I was so pigheaded."

To her surprise, his brown eyes took on a pained look. "You don't regret it, do you?"

She shook her head. "Never. I only regret forcing your hand."

Ethan reached out and brushed his fingertips across her cheek. "I'm glad that you did."

Tears pooled suddenly in her eyes from the softness of his voice. She didn't fully understand what Ethan meant, but she sensed the tenderness behind his words.

“In fact, Charlie and I had come up with plans to ruin you some more.”

She stared at him. “More?”

He nodded. “Yes. If what your father says is true, then we’ll have to find a point at which Graves will not want you back. The only other alternative is to flee, but I wouldn’t have you living a life looking over your shoulder in fear all the time. Graves is the type of man who’d pursue you.”

“Yes, I see that. I sensed that fierceness in him. Perhaps that’s why, not even knowing him, I couldn’t stand him.”

Ethan smiled mirthlessly. “I would say that your instincts were sound and give testament to your basic sanity.” He fell silent and sipped his tea.

She watched him, her own stomach too tight to eat or drink. Her mind thundered with the possibilities of what Ethan and Charlie had devised for her further ruination.

Finally Ethan set down his cup and cleared his throat. “Charlie came up with the idea of you and I posing for a scandalous picture that he would paint. The painting would make it into Graves’s hands. Perhaps knowing that his fiancée had posed for such a portrait would fend him off. There are several distinct disadvantages to this plan, even though it might work.”

Violette felt her cheeks redden, and she glanced at the untouched roll and eggs on her plate. “*Oui*. It is a confession to Graves that you, indeed, found me and did not return me to him.”

“That’s correct.”

“There is also the potential for scandal.” She whipped her gaze to his. “Your reputation ...”

“Truthfully, Violette, I’m not concerned about that for myself. I’ve given a lifetime of service to the Crown, to family and society, only to see my brother nearly destroyed. Society

is like a disloyal dog. You can feed it and care for it, but in the end, it will bite you if you don't give it what it wants."

His words touched a place deep inside her, reminding her of the way Martin Poole and his parents had treated her and *Maman*, as if they were warts on their noses. She squared her shoulders. "Nor do I care. I agree with your analogy."

A brief picture flashed in her mind of her and Ethan, their naked bodies intertwined, posing for a painting. Her breath hitched softly. That was all she wanted, really. To be in his arms again, naked, touching, his masculine strength pressed close to her. "*Oui*. We shall tell Charlie when he comes out that we should make this painting."

Chapter Nine

During breakfast, Ethan informed Charlie of Violette's decision. Charlie ordered a divan brought to his studio, and after breakfast, Violette went back there with Ethan and Charlie.

Her heart rioted the entire way, not because she was having any second thoughts about the painting, but because she would be naked with Ethan, their nude bodies entangled in an erotic embrace as they posed for a painting.

Which meant that Charlie would be watching them and capturing the image on his canvas.

Charlie turned to her, his features appearing tense. "I regret that I don't have a screen, Violette. I've ... never used a live model before. But I'll turn around while you ... undress." His voice tightened on that last word.

Violette swallowed past the lump in her throat and nodded.

He furrowed his brow. "You're certain of this? I mean, I don't wish you to feel coerced in any way."

His concern helped ease some of the awkwardness in the air between them, and she smiled. "*Non. Absolument, non.* I do so much wish to be rid of this man, Graves. If this

painting will help, then I have no reservations.” She watched Charlie’s eyes as they regarded her. For a fleeting second, she felt as if he’d seen deep inside her, as if he understood her true motivation for wanting to pose with his brother.

A gentle smile curved his lips. “I understand. We’ll say no more about it.” He held her gaze for one more moment before turning around.

Ethan stood nearby and when Violette looked up, she saw him watching her. A similar look of apprehension strained his features.

“Ethan,” she said softly, “is something the matter?”

His hands had been on the buttons of his vest. He lowered them. “I’m concerned for you. I know you’re anxious to get away from Graves. We are equally as anxious to have you free of him. However, discussing something and doing it are almost always two different matters.”

She furrowed her brow, her heart sinking. “Do you not wish to pose with me?”

To her relief, his eyes darkened in a velvety way. A tiny smile teased the corners of his lips. “I wouldn’t say that.”

“That’s what matters to her, Ethan,” she heard Charlie say. “She thought you were going to reject her.”

Violette’s heart fluttered and her cheeks burned. She averted her gaze from Ethan and glanced at Charlie whose back was still to her.

He must have felt her eyes on him for he glanced around, turning quickly away. “I’m sorry, Violette, it slipped out. Sometimes I feel Ethan is a bit of a dolt, even if he is my caring elder brother.”

Charlie’s confession stole her embarrassment and she chuckled, especially at Ethan’s sheepish expression.

“Charlie,” he said, “My concern is legitimate.”

“I know. But so is Violette’s.”

She watched Ethan shake his head in obvious frustration, and she suppressed another bit of laughter. However, her smile faded when she saw Ethan's fingers rise once again to his vest buttons. He'd already removed his jacket and his arm muscles strained against the starched white material.

A flush of warmth ignited in her belly. She turned away and began to unbutton her own blouse.

The room was quiet for the next few moments, the only sound the muffled whisper of clothing being removed.

When Violette had removed her skirts and stood only in her chemise and pantalettes, she stole a glance at Ethan. Immediately, her blood warmed in her veins, and she forced back the audible catch in her breath.

He had almost finished undressing and wore only his drawers, which he was already unbuttoning. His back was to her and the flexing of his back and arm muscles as he moved immediately captured her attention.

Like a guilty voyeur, she watched him slip his drawers off, her gaze sliding over his hard buttocks and sloping thighs. He was the statue of a Greek god come to life. And she was about to be pressed against his chiseled form.

He moved around, his front becoming visible as he folded the drawers.

She caught her breath and turned her back to him, pretending she hadn't been watching.

"I'm ready," she heard him say.

"How about you, Violette?" Charlie asked, a slight chord of tension audible in his voice.

"Almost. I'm in my underthings."

He paused, as if the mention of her underthings had affected him somehow. "Well, if you wish, we'll work on the placement of the pose before you remove them."

She nodded, swallowing hard. "All right."

Slowly she turned, trying hard not to stare at Ethan. She looked down, but not before catching a glance at his bare front. She didn't understand her bashfulness. After all, she'd already seen him naked. He'd been inside her, touched her everywhere with his hands and mouth.

"I'm going to turn around now, Violette," Charlie said.

His utter politeness was very touching, making her feel even more like a leech the way she had to force herself not to stare at Ethan's *zizi*, along with all the rest of him. "Yes, Charlie."

Her hands hung at her sides, she watched Charlie slowly turn, maneuvering himself on his cane.

Their eyes met for a moment, and Violette saw his visible struggle not to stare at her or let his gaze rove over her body. He was trying so hard to be respectful that his intention stirred her heart. However, she liked him and found that she wasn't at all uncomfortable. In fact, to her sudden, burning shame, she found herself *wanting* him to see her naked.

She looked down at her bare feet. What kind of woman was she? *Maman* had always spoken openly to her about sex and men and women and what they did together, but perhaps her openness had produced a wanton whore. Perhaps she was truly destined for a place like Madame DuChamps's. Maybe Ethan shouldn't have pulled her out of there.

"Come here, Violette," Charlie's gentle voice cut into her reverie of shame. He had gone over to the sofa. "I've considered the possibilities here," he went on, "and I believe if we want *scandalous*, you, Violette, should be on your back, underneath Ethan." He paused and cleared his throat. His voice trembled slightly. "He'll ... um ... have his arms around you and will be looking down into your eyes, as if he's ... about to kiss you."

Kiss. Underneath. Arms around you. The words reverberated through her already heating body. She nodded, moving steadily toward the sofa. Her heart pumped and her sex

tingled madly. She sensed Ethan close by, also approaching the leather sofa, where just the night before, Charlie had held her and then let her fall asleep with her head on his lap.

Charlie went to a table and picked up his sketchpad. He returned to his wheelchair, which still sat nearby from the night before and lowered himself into it, the pad on his lap. "I'll close my eyes while you take off your underclothes and you and Ethan get into the position I described. I assume you don't need ... specific instructions."

"We don't," Ethan muttered, a husky tinge to his voice.

"Thank you, Charlie," she said softly. She turned and untied the bow on her shimmy. One glance at Ethan showed her that, unlike his brother, he wasn't going to turn away while she finished undressing.

She pulled the chemise up over her head and let it drop to the floor. Without stopping to watch Ethan's response, she loosened the tie on her pantalettes and let them pool around her feet.

She bent to step out of them and felt the sudden warmth of Ethan's hand as it closed around hers, supporting her while she lifted each foot free of the gauzy material. Reluctantly, because of another wave of intense shyness, she raised her gaze to his and smiled.

His dark eyes had taken on a velvety sheen, appreciation emanating from them. His face had darkened, and she registered the deepening of his breath by the rise and fall of his broad chest. And by the way his *zizi* stiffened and rose slightly from its formerly more relaxed position.

He guided her to the sofa and into a lying down position. The cushions were wide enough for her to lie with one leg draped over the edge when she spread her legs.

"Are you in position yet?" Charlie asked.

"Almost." Ethan's voice was low and husky. "I will let you know immediately." He looked down at Violette, his *zizi* now fully hard. "Are you ready?"

She nodded, the sight of his erection sending a shiver of heat through her sex, which she could already feel moistening. She held her arms out to him, her body craving the feel of his masculine strength against her, covering her.

Without another word, he bent over the sofa and lowered himself gently onto her, cradling himself between her thighs.

She nearly let out a groan of pleasure as his chest pressed onto hers, crushing her breasts in the most delicious way. Her nipples tingled wildly, slivers of heat traveling through her breasts as he adjusted himself, rubbing the tender buds with his movements.

He slid his hands underneath her, cradling her torso completely in the circle of his arms.

Pose or not, the feeling of being so completely held weakened her, body and soul, and she melted underneath him, her lips parting slightly. She stared up at him, drinking in the sight of his face hovering above hers, desire pooling in his eyes.

His lips parted too, and he looked as if at any moment, he would descend and kiss her passionately. "All right, Charlie," he breathed.

Charlie cleared his throat. "Okay then, I'm going to open my eyes. Don't move from your pose, not even to look at me."

"Very well."

In the next moment, Violette heard Charlie catch his breath. Several more moments passed where she resisted the urge to look at him and see his expression. She did, however, sense his gaze on her as she lay under Ethan, locked in a passionate and erotic embrace. Charlie's breathing, noticeably deeper, mingled with theirs in the quiet studio.

"Splendid," Charlie murmured finally, his tone a blend of wonder and intrigued arousal.

In the next moment, she heard the light scratching sounds of his pencil on the sketchpad. Her body, already melting and aroused from being entwined naked with Ethan,

heated even more from having Charlie's gaze on her as well while he captured the erotic moment on paper.

Ethan's erection pressed right against the most sensitive part of her inner sex. She slipped her arm around him, her fingertips pressing into the muscles of his back. Without thinking, she arched her pelvis against him in a silent plea.

He let out a heavy breath, his chest heaving against hers.

Violette didn't know how much longer she could hold this pose without begging Ethan to make love to her. In front of Charlie.

"Perhaps you should make love and be done with it," Charlie said. His tone was husky and held no annoyance. "I think I could continue sketching ... that is ... if you've no objections."

Violette broke the pose and turned her head. Had he read her mind?

Charlie was staring at her, his blue eyes transfixed. "I'm sorry. I do kind of read minds, although in this case, I'm not certain it was necessary."

His suggestion had started the burning in her cheeks again, reminding her of the *pute* she'd become. The objection rose to her lips.

As if on cue, Ethan shifted his weight slightly, causing his *zizi* to slide against her weeping, swollen core. "Do you object, Violette?" He said it in a voice tight with hunger.

The sensation whipped the objection that had arisen. "No objection," she murmured.

Charlie shifted also in his seat. "I ... wasn't trying to push," he added in a soft voice. "I just could see that you both --"

"Don't worry," Ethan said. "We're friends here." He slid against her again, his pelvis grinding against her open crevice.

Violette moaned and tilted her hips upward. She opened her legs wider, raising the one that had been hanging over the side to cradle Ethan's hip.

Ethan moved again, the swollen head of his *zizi* finding her opening. He stared down into her eyes, his lids heavy, his lips still parted. He brought his hips in a fluid motion against hers, sheathing himself deep inside her.

A gasp of pleasure-pain escaped her. Her fingers sought purchase deeper in his hard back muscles. She tilted her head back, her eyes closed, her breasts jutting upward.

Ethan retreated until he was almost out and then slid in again, until their bodies met. This time, his lips descended onto hers in a searing kiss.

Charlie's pencil froze in mid-air. His sketch immediately forgotten, he watched Violette and Ethan, his gaze helplessly captured by the magnificent sight of Violette's naked body writhing sensuously.

How he could have thought he'd be able to concentrate on sketching or painting with this young woman naked in front of him? Apparently, he'd grossly overestimated his mental powers.

Her coppery tresses spilled over the pillow under her head. Her pale skin, freckled across her shoulders and chest, made his mouth water.

The pencil dropped from his hand onto the pad. He lowered both hands to the armrests of his chair, gripping them as his body seemed to catch fire. Violette's body was made for a man's loving.

His breath hitched sharply when Ethan pulled his lips from hers and made a path of hungry kisses down her delicate throat toward her lush full breasts. Her nipples had already hardened and she arched her back when Ethan's mouth closed over one of them, his mouth tugging and suckling until she moaned.

From the angle of his chair to the sofa, Charlie could also see her lower body. Her hips bucked rhythmically against Ethan's as he slid in and out of her and each movement gave Charlie a clear view of the red thatch of curls on her mound.

Charlie wished it were he on top of Violette now. The scent of sex began to emanate from their heated bodies, teasing his own erection to an uncomfortable bulge against his drawers. Each view of her pussy sent another hot streak through his groin.

Ethan pulled suddenly out of Violette and trailed his tongue between her breasts and down her stomach.

Oh, God. Charlie practically groaned out loud and shifted in his seat to ease the throbbing in his cock. Ethan positioned his torso between Violette's thighs and spread open her pussy lips.

Violette gasped. She was watching him, a look of amazement brightening her already flushed cheeks.

Ethan lowered his mouth to her open sex. Anchoring his hands on her full hips, his eyes closed as he feasted on her.

Violette cried out and threw her head back. Her head thrashed back and forth on the pillow, and she moaned, each tiny sound ripping from her with the rhythm of Ethan's licking and suckling.

Charlie saw Ethan push a finger into her opening, sliding it in and out of her while he laved her swollen bud with his tongue. He licked his lips, imagining Violette's musky scent and taste. The licking sound of Ethan's mouth on the slick folds of Violette's sex crashed in his ears.

Suddenly, Violette's entire body clenched. Her fingers curled into Ethan's hair, her breasts jutted upward. Tiny cries spiraled from her throat and Charlie recognized the throes of female orgasm.

The sound crackled inside him, reawakening him to the desire he'd suppressed for so long. His cock surged again in his drawers and he longed to open his trousers and free himself so that he could find release from this exquisite torture, if only with his own hand.

When her orgasm had left her drained, Violette wilted against the sofa, her breasts heaving. Her skin and chest were flushed pink.

Ethan lifted his face from her sex, her musk glistening on his lips and chin.

Charlie caught his breath, almost as if he'd been eating her himself. He watched Ethan rise up and settle himself once again on top of her. Her hands went to his buttocks, squeezing them in silent demand.

Ethan slid easily into her and rhythmically glided in and out while kissing her and letting her taste her own intimate juices. She seemed to find pleasure in it, and Charlie saw her pink tongue dart out from between her lips and slide across Ethan's chin and lips.

Another groan almost escaped him. Watching Violette being made love to was one of the most erotic experiences he'd ever had. Violette was the first woman since Sarita who had even begun to affect him this strongly. For the first time in so long, diverting his passion into his art was not enough. Remembering how soft and warm Violette had been in his arms when she had cried, he craved the feel and taste of her bare skin and longed for the deep physical connection that only came from lovemaking.

Ethan's thrusting increased in speed and hardness. It seemed to go on for a long time, but at last he groaned and pulled out of her, stroking himself as his seed spilled onto her stomach. He drained the last bit and leaned back, resting against the back of the sofa. When his breathing had calmed somewhat, he reached over to the floor for a handkerchief in his trouser pocket and wiped his seed from Violette's stomach. Then he lay gently on top of her, curling his fingers into her hair. She put her arms around him, lazily stroking his back.

They both turned to Charlie. He cleared his throat, wishing his raging erection would go away. It wouldn't. The scent of Violette's female musk permeated the air and her flushed skin, and silky tresses of red hair spilling over the pillow still invited fantasy.

"I'm sorry," Ethan murmured. "I feel like we've excluded you in some terrible way."

“Me, too,” Violette said. Her blue-green eyes held a surprising amount of sheepishness and sympathy for someone who’d just been made love to with absolute abandon.

His words shook Charlie out of his reverie, but only a little. “Not at all. I’m the one who suggested it.”

“Ethan, Charlie, I have something to tell you.”

Ethan touched her cheek. “What is it?”

She looked at him then at Charlie, her face suddenly lined with worry. “This was so sweet and beautiful. I don’t want Graves to see us like this. Perhaps we shouldn’t make the painting. Charlie, are you offended?”

He suppressed the most overpowering urge to rise from the chair and go to her. He wanted desperately to wind his fingers into her hair and kiss her. “Not in the least, Violette. After having watched you, I don’t want him ever to see you as I or Ethan have seen you.”

Silence descended over them while Ethan regarded him with a knowing, yet compassionate expression. “We may speak openly, can’t we?” he said after several moments of quiet.

Charlie nodded. “Of course. Then again, whatever is not said, I’ll intuit anyway. Best to have it in the open.” His hands tightened on the arms of the wheelchair as he braced himself for what he sensed his brother was about to say.

“Now that we’re not going to do the painting, we’ll have to find another creative way to *ruin* Violette.” Underneath his words, the message was clear. Ethan’s suggestion of Charlie making love to her was their next choice.

However, as it had before, the mere thought of Violette seeing his scars and gasping in horror or not wanting to go near him was terrifying. On the other hand, his desire for her was overwhelming. He longed to bury himself deep inside her and taste every inch of her sweet body. The conflicting emotions warred inside him. “What is that, Ethan?”

Ethan cleared his throat and ran his hand over Violette's bare shoulder. "Well, that is, if both of you were willing ..." He looked at Violette. "I had had the thought that ... well ... you should be with us both ... at the same time. That would be possibly one of the most scandalous things you could do, and one that would certainly repel Graves." He smoothed his fingertips down her arm. "What do you think?"

Violette stared up at Ethan. His suggestion had touched on a conflict inside her that made her dizzy with its intensity. On the one hand, she couldn't imagine anything more erotic. She was deeply attracted to each of them, and the thought of being surrounded by these two masculine, intoxicating men made her blood sing like fire through her veins. On the other hand, just the fact that she wanted to pounce on the offer made her a terrible whore.

"She feels put on the spot, Ethan," Charlie said, his voice full of apprehension.

"*Non*, Charlie," she said quickly, "It's all right." She sighed. "I will be honest with you both. What Ethan has suggested, I would love that very much. You are both wonderful men. Wonderful."

"Then what is troubling you, Violette?" Ethan's voice was gentle.

She looked at them both, touched by their expectant gazes. "I'm becoming frightened that you both will think less of me. Especially after I forced myself on you, Ethan, yesterday. Perhaps you will feel me incapable of anything deeper."

Ethan leaned over and pressed a kiss onto her forehead. He smoothed her hair back and gazed down at her. "I certainly don't think you incapable of depth, Violette. You're full of life and spirit." He turned to his brother. "What about you, Charlie? Do you believe Violette to be superficial?"

He shook his head. "Absolutely not. I agree wholeheartedly with what Ethan said."

Violette's eyes stung with sudden tears. "Thank you," she whispered.

“We’ll start slowly, then.” Ethan’s voice broke the silence that followed. He looked at his brother. “Charlie, why don’t you come sit next to Violette?” With a gentle hand on her arm, he drew her to a sitting position.

She looked at Charlie. His blue eyes were wide open, watching her with an expression that made her sense his fear of her rejection. She smiled at him. “I’d like that.” In spite of the satisfying lovemaking she’d experienced with Ethan, the situation was so erotic, her body continued to tingle, the sensation spilling into her breasts and swirling down between her thighs.

She watched Charlie push himself up with his cane and shift himself over to the sofa, sinking beside her. Immediately, the clean scent of his aftershave filled the air around them.

He looked at her and she returned his gaze, a sweet yet potent blend of awkwardness and attraction. His gaze flickered downward, sweeping over her breasts and further to her sex. Heat tingled in her cheeks at the strangeness of his looking at her naked while he was still fully dressed.

“Go on,” Ethan urged in a soft voice, “Touch her.”

Ethan’s quiet order heightened her arousal. Her breathing deepened again as she watched Charlie for what he would do. Her skin ached for his touch and she parted her lips in anticipation of his kiss.

Charlie reached up and brushed his fingertips across her cheek and then her lips. “You’re so beautiful, Violette,” he breathed, his voice trembling.

“Thank you. So are you.” She, too, reached out her hand and touched his cheek gingerly. His masculine skin was lightly rough even though he’d recently shaved.

Charlie’s touch slid across her jaw, down her throat, and across her collarbone. His fingertips skimmed over her bare flesh with wonder and tenderness and instinctively, Violette sank back against the cushions, offering more of her body to his exploration.

Charlie turned in his seat and moved in a bit closer until his thigh pressed along hers. Slowly, torturously, he ventured further down her chest, trailing his fingertips down the valley between her breasts then over one breast, cupping the swollen orb in his hand.

“Charlie,” she whispered, her breath deepening as he squeezed her breast gently, his thumb toying delicately with her still erect nipple. Her eyes fluttered closed as the delicious sensation filled her, urging her to part her legs in surrender.

She opened her eyes, her lids seductively heavy. The moment her gaze met his, he leaned over and pressed his lips to hers. A groan vibrated deep in his throat and she sensed the uncoiling of the passion that had ignited while he was watching her with Ethan.

Ethan pressed into her from the other side, his hand caressing one of her thighs. His newly aroused breaths mingled with hers and Charlie’s and the masculine scent of two men filled her senses completely.

Charlie deepened their kiss, seeking her tongue with his. He tasted delicious as he explored the recesses of her mouth, his hand still cupping her breast. After another moment, however, his hand strayed to her other breast, fondling it gently. His fingertips dappled a heated touch over the soft swell of flesh and caressed the hardening tip before continuing down her stomach. His fingertips raked through her damp curls, eagerly seeking to explore her intimate core.

Her breath caught softly as his index finger dipped between the soft folds, sliding in tiny circles over her clitoris and then seeking her opening.

The feeling of her open sex seemed to arouse him further, for he moaned again into her mouth and moved his upper body closer against hers. The material of his starched shirt brushed her nipples, enhancing the pleasure he was giving her with his hand.

“That’s right, Charlie,” Ethan murmured, “Enjoy her. She’s luscious.”

Violette slid her hand around Charlie's back, exploring the hard muscles bunching underneath his shirt as he moved. Bit by bit, she was sliding more onto her back, which rested now in Ethan's lap. Charlie went with her, his lips still pressed to hers.

Ethan reached his hands around to her breasts, squeezing them lightly while Charlie kissed her and played with her down below. He slid another finger inside her, gently filling her while his thumb moved in circles on the tiny nubbin.

Violette moaned, drowning in pleasure. Before long, the enjoyment built, coiling in her womb. In the next moment, another orgasm exploded, leaving her breathless.

He pulled away from their kisses and looked down at her, his face flushed, his lips swollen, his chest heaving. "I want you," he rasped.

His husky voice touched her deep inside. He and Ethan were making her feel like a goddess, worshipped and adored. She opened her legs, wanting only to give him as much pleasure in return.

Charlie's breath hitched. He lowered his suspenders, then worked open his trousers and drawers.

Violette looked down, unable to see most of him, except for his erection, jutting hungrily toward her.

He slid easily inside her. A loud groan escaped him, and he took her mouth again in deep kisses, tasting her passionately.

She allowed her hands to steal under his shirt and undershirt. The warmth of his skin penetrated her palms, the hard muscles flexing against her hands as he took her. She ventured further down, smoothing her hands over his slim hips, daring to rest her hands on his buttocks. Her fingertips grazed skin that felt puckered and damaged. In the recesses of her heated mind, she knew that there were scars from his wounds.

She didn't care. Charlie was a sweet good man who made her feel beautiful and desirable.

He kissed her mouth fervently before pulling away and showering more hot kisses on her neck and chest and breasts, while Ethan cradled her from behind as if he were offering her to his brother.

In moments, Charlie groaned, his lips pressed to her shoulder.

She held him close while his climax seized his body, his warm seed filling her.

Little by little, his thrusting slowed and he collapsed lightly onto her, breathing heavily, his chest lightly crushing her breasts.

“Charlie.” She whispered his name and pulled one hand out from his undershirt to bury her fingers in his soft golden hair. His warm body emanated a delicious musky scent and his *zizi*, still sheathed deep inside her, slowly softened and slipped out.

“Thank you, Violette,” he whispered, caressing her cheek.

“No, thank *you*. Thank you both.” She closed her eyes, a tiny smile on her lips.

Ethan stroked her hair and Charlie snuggled her in his arms.

A sleepy drowse came over her, and she didn’t know how long they’d been resting when the sound of horses neighing in the distance interrupted them.

She opened her eyes to see Ethan pulling aside the drape and peering out the window.

“There’s a carriage coming up the drive,” he said.

Charlie sat up, letting Violette rise to her knees on the sofa. She leaned over the back and peered out the window.

Her blood froze. Her heart thrashed in her chest. She cried out softly and gripped the back of the sofa to keep from toppling backward.

A hand closed over her shoulder. “Violette, what is it?” Ethan’s voice was dark with concern.

She looked at him, her lower lip trembling. “I know that carriage,” she whispered. “It belongs to ... Graves.”

Chapter Ten

Violette watched the carriage come to a halt in front of the house. She tore her gaze away, biting down on her lower lip to stop its trembling.

Ethan's hand still rested on her shoulder and Charlie settled a gentle touch on her other shoulder. "Don't worry, Violette," Charlie said, "We'll protect you."

She looked at him. His blue gaze rested on her face, their deep azure reflecting the same determination she'd heard in his voice.

Ethan let the drape fall back into place and squeezed her shoulder. "Charlie's right," he murmured. "You're with *us* now."

His quiet, strong words enveloped her, making her feel completely safe. Tears flooded her eyes. She knew that Ethan felt responsible for her now, but she didn't believe that *with us now* meant something permanent. How could it, the way she'd crashed into their lives? When this ordeal was over, she felt certain he'd want his life back. And so would Charlie. "Thank you."

Ethan stood up and reached for his clothing. "You stay here with Charlie," he said, "I'll speak with Graves."

“Ethan, *non*.” She grasped his arm. “I will come with you.” A tide of strength flooded her. With Ethan and Charlie’s protection, she felt able to confront the man who sought to tear her away from them. “I can’t let you face him alone. It’s *my* problem. I feel strong now, because of both of you. Please.”

Ethan paused and looked at Charlie. “What about you?” he asked his brother.

A muscle twitched in Charlie’s jaw, but his gaze remained determined. “I must face him, too,” he said in a soft but strong voice.

Ethan sighed. “All right. Get dressed and let’s go.”

Mason met them in the hall and informed them he’d shown their guests into the front parlor until given further instructions. “I told them I’d fetch Sir Charles, my lord,” he said. “I wasn’t certain you would want them to know you were here.”

“Well done, Mason.” Ethan paused. “Did you say *guests*, plural?”

“Yes, my lord. Lord Graves and Mr. Martin Poole.”

Violette gasped. “My father’s here?”

Mason looked at her knowingly and she realized then he’d probably never been convinced by the distant relation story. “A redheaded gentleman?”

She nodded.

“Then yes, miss. That is your father.”

Charlie linked his arm through hers. “Come now, let’s get it over with.”

She pushed close against him, and they resumed their path to the front parlor.

Graves and her father both stood when she filed through the doorway with Ethan and Charlie. Both men’s eyebrows shot up.

“Violette!” her father exclaimed.

Violette's heart crashed violently. She looked at her father and then at Graves, whose lips curled in an angry sneer. She squared her shoulders, determined not to let either of them see how afraid she felt. "Hello, Father."

Graves's face turned a dark shade of scarlet, and his icy blue eyes stormed. "What is the meaning of this, Carrick? You found her and did not bring her back to me." He made a fist. "I'll have your head for this!"

Violette looked at him as all the anger she'd suppressed since learning of her engagement surfaced. How dare he speak to Ethan like that, especially in his own home! "He's done nothing wrong!" She jutted out her chin under the hateful gaze he turned on her. Her stance belied her rioting nerves, bolstered as she felt by the two strong and loving men standing on either side of her. "I begged him not to send me back to you. He took pity on me."

Graves's brow furrowed deeply, and his lips curled again like a snarling dog. He looked more furious than hurt, like a spoiled child not getting his way. "You led me to believe you were happy with our engagement."

A stab of guilt shot through her. "My father had tricked me, using my grief and hurt to lure me to England. I had nowhere else to turn, and I was afraid to object. But I *do* have somewhere to turn now."

Graves's angry gaze flickered to Ethan and then to Charlie. "I just bet you do. I suppose you've laid down for them to show them your gratitude."

"You will not speak to her that way," Ethan said, his tone full of menace.

Graves glared at him. "She's *my* fiancée. I will speak to her as it pleases me."

"I'm not your fiancée. I'm in love with the captain."

Graves started as if he'd been slapped, but then he crossed his arms. "Which one?"

Violette stared at him. Here was her chance to say the words that would get rid of him, once and for all. She took a deep breath. "Both of them. I'm in love with Ethan and Charles."

As soon as her confession left her lips, a wave of warmth washed through her. She'd made the statement for effect, but as soon as she'd said the words, she knew they were true. Deeply, beautifully true. And if loving these two men, especially after only one day, made her a wanton whore, then so be it. She didn't want to be anywhere else in the entire world.

She only wished that Ethan and Charlie felt the same way.

"This is preposterous!" Graves swung around to her father. "Poole, I knew you were up to something! Cheating me this way. I'll ruin you."

Her father opened his mouth, but no sound came out.

"He had nothing to do with it," Violette said. "I'm the one who ran away."

Graves glowered at her. "I'm supposed to believe you? You little whore, an actress, just like your mother."

"That's enough!" Ethan lunged toward him, but Charlie stepped forward and stayed him with a hand on his arm.

"Ethan, wait."

"Charlie, he will *not* speak to Violette that way and get away with it."

"I agree. But men like him will goad you mercilessly and then make more trouble for you when you react."

Violette saw Ethan relent, although he cast a threatening glare at Graves. Another flush of warmth spread through her at the way Ethan had defended her.

Charlie released Ethan's arm and turned to Graves. "All's fair in love and war, Graves," he said. "You of all people should know that." He took a step forward, blocking Violette's view of Graves's angry visage. "Violette is *our* fiancée now, not yours. She loves us and we love her."

A mangled guffaw escaped Graves. "That's polyandry! Illegal in this country and a practice of savages!"

Charlie squared his shoulders. He seemed unruffled by the insult. "I don't know anyone who is more a savage than you, sir. The actions you took in Parliament cost thousands of lives -- men, women, and children, British and Indian, my wife included."

For a moment, Charlie's words seemed to shock Graves into silence, but the man gathered himself again and pointed at Charlie. "Ridiculous accusations! I did what was best for the Empire! For the Queen herself! And as far as savages go, they cannot be tamed, no matter how much you try to civilize them."

"In that case," Ethan interjected, "You should be content to leave the three of us alone in our savagery and go back to your civilized life."

Graves narrowed his eyes at Ethan and then turned to Martin Poole. "You're her father. Do you wish to see her ruined in this ghastly manner?"

Martin Poole looked at him, his round face flushed. He seemed at a loss for words, but then he turned to Violette. "Violette, is this what you truly want?"

She nodded, her heart pounding. "Yes, Father. *Maman* would have wanted me to be happy."

He bowed his head. "Yes, I know. I owe her a lot." He looked back at Graves. "I'm sorry, Richard, I cannot force her to marry you, not after the way I've treated her and her mother. Ruin *me* if you wish, but leave Violette in peace."

Violette stared at her father, at the man she'd believed didn't care about her all these years. Tears pooled in her eyes and one slipped out onto her cheek.

Graves's face flushed a frightening shade of red. "You pathetic little rat! You don't have to worry about my ruining you. One word from me, and no one in the entire British Empire will give you a farthing to ship their merchandise anywhere, not even from one side of the Thames to the other."

"This interview is finished," Ethan said. He stepped toward Graves, his chest puffed out, his hands curled into fists.

Graves's mouth pressed into a firm line. He glared at Violette, then tugged on his vest as if his clothing had been rumpled. He looked at her father. "You'll find a different way back to London," he muttered, then strode out of the room.

A few moments later, the sound of the front door opening and closing echoed through the airy hall, followed by the clop of horses' hooves on the gravel driveway.

Only when the sound had faded, did Violette take a deep breath.

Charlie stepped into her and put a comforting arm around her shoulder.

She embraced him and held on, her face pressed into his chest. When he finally released her, Ethan was standing nearby, and she stepped into his embrace.

"It's all right, Violette," he crooned, stroking her hair, "He's gone now."

She raised her face from where it rested on his chest and looked at him and Charlie. "You both were so brave, so wonderful. Charlie, the things you said to him were beautiful. You must have wanted to say them for so long."

He reached out and touched her cheek. "I am glad I did. I feel cleansed."

"I also appreciated the way you stood up for me and told him I was your fiancée now." She couldn't help the sudden emotional pain that gripped her. How she wished what he and Ethan had said were true and not just a ruse to rid her of Graves.

"I meant it," Charlie said.

Her heart fluttered and she looked at him. "You did?"

He nodded. "Yes, I did. I want you to stay here with me ... with us." He looked at Ethan.

"So do I, Violette." Ethan reached out and pushed a lock of her hair back behind her ear. "In two days you've managed to do what no one else has been able to do for many years. Bring Charlie and me out of hiding. Emotionally, that is. We must love you. I love you."

"So do I."

Violette covered her mouth as the tears began to fall rapidly from her eyes. She couldn't believe her fortune.

"And we have your father's blessing, apparently. That is, if he wasn't just saying that for effect."

In that moment, Violette remembered her father. She turned around.

Papa had sunk into a chair, his hands gripping the arms. He was watching her, an uncertain expression on his face, as if he felt he didn't have the right to approach her. "It wasn't for effect," he said quietly. He rose from the chair and walked over to her. "I owe you that much. I must say, it is ... unusual. However, I've known Ethan and Charles much of my life. I know they'll be good to you." He nodded.

"They already have been, Father."

"Violette, when all this is truly over, I hope you'll sit down with me and let me explain everything about your mother, about why I've been so ... terrible."

Her breath hitched softly. "Isn't it over now?"

Papa sighed. "I do hope so. However, I don't put anything past Graves." He turned to Ethan. "Do you mind having a carriage take me back to London?"

"Not at all."

Her father looked at her again. "I do so much want to spend some time with you, Violette, but I must return to London now. I feel I can keep a better eye on Graves and what he's doing. I don't trust him. I know you'll be safe here with the captains."

"Father, you're scaring me. What do you think he would do?"

Papa shook his head. "I don't know. But best to be careful." He reached out and patted her cheek. "I'm so grateful for your forgiveness, Violette."

He then turned and bowed politely to Ethan and Charlie. "Thank you for what you've done for my ... daughter," he said. "For ... me."

"You're welcome," Ethan said.

Papa nodded. "I'll have her things sent here tomorrow. I know she needs her dresses and effects."

"Thank you, Papa."

"It's a paltry thing after what you've been through," he said in a sad voice. After another gaze at Violette, he turned and left.

Charlie reached for her again and she let herself fall into his arms. "We'll keep you safe, I promise," he murmured into her hair.

"I know you will."

"In the meantime," Ethan said, "We've yet to give our lady a proper tour of the estate ... of her new home."

Charlie released her from the embrace and smiled at her, linking her arm through his. "Yes. A tour is in order. The downstairs and the grounds."

"And then later," Ethan said, "We'll show you the bedroom."

Chapter Eleven

“Slut. Whore. Strumpet.” Graves muttered the curses under his breath as his carriage bobbed and swayed along the road back to London. To think that for three weeks he’d wined and dined the girl, taken her to the theater, museums, shown her all the best that London had to offer, and this was how she thanked him! For God’s sake, she’d never been out of France before this.

He slumped back and stared out the window. *Arrogant little bitch*. He could have his pick any day of debutantes, widows, and divorcees. He’d chosen her, and she’d rejected him. The way her mother had twenty-five years ago.

Graves shook his head. That was something he could never understand. How had Martin Poole won over the great Sandrine Maynard? Poole was rather short, with red hair, stubby fingers, and no athletic prowess whatsoever. Yet, Sandrine had been charmed enough to lie down for him and bear his child. The least Poole could have done was to ensure that his daughter would be his.

He shuddered, remembering the way Violette had declared love for the Carricks. Two men! Preposterous. Yet, the look in her eyes was unmistakable. A man could look at a

woman and know when she'd gotten a good fucking. No doubt the girl had opened her legs for both of them.

Strangely enough, the fact that she had done such a thing only strengthened his determination to have her. At first, when she'd made her confession, he'd been horrified. Galvanized. Now, he felt only a burning rage deep inside. Violette Poole thought to make a fool of him. She was probably laughing about it with her two consorts right this moment.

A plan began to formulate in his mind. He smiled to himself. Before he was finished, she would be his. She would know what it felt like to have him inside of her. Maybe then, she wouldn't be so eager to run away.

And he planned to get his hands on her as soon as possible.

* * * * *

"How do you say *sunset* in French?" Charlie moved a bit closer to Violette and reached up, sliding his fingers into her hair.

Violette's eyes fluttered closed as his fingertips brushed the nape of her neck and sent tingling sensations along her scalp. "*Coucher de soleil*," she said softly.

They sat on the edge of Charlie's bed, watching the sunset over the reflecting pool through the open French doors. Ethan sat on her other side, his hands covering hers. Violette's tour of the estate had ended in Charlie's bedroom.

Charlie leaned over and nuzzled her hair. "I should know that, but I don't remember any of the French I studied." He pressed his lips to her cheek, kissing her skin with the lightest yet most sensual touch. "Mm," he murmured, "I want you again, Violette."

His words sent warm shivers through her, stoking her desire. The way he and Ethan had loved her earlier today in Charlie's studio had only left her wanting more.

She tilted her head back, giving him full access to her neck.

“Violette,” he whispered against her cheek. His hands came up, closing gently around her upper arms. With light pressure, he pushed her onto her back, covering her neck with soft, fervent kisses. “Oh God,” he murmured, his lips brushing over the delicate pulse in her throat, “You’re the sweetest gift from Heaven.”

Charlie’s breath deepened to a husky rasp. His passion swept up like a tide and Violette sensed all the desire he’d funneled into his painting now pouring out onto her. She didn’t mind. She arched her back upward toward him and opened her legs underneath her skirts, offering herself up to him.

Charlie worked open the buttons of her blouse and spread the sides apart, exposing her camisole. He trailed his kisses down her throat onto the flesh above the neckline of the material, feathering the tip of his tongue over the tops of her breasts.

The moist heat of his kisses caused her to arch her breasts upward again. She clasped her arms around his head, burrowing her fingers into his soft hair. Her eyes fluttered open and she saw Ethan, still seated on the edge of the bed, watching them. “Ethan,” she whispered.

Charlie stopped kissing her skin and turned his face upward. “I’m sorry, Ethan,” he breathed. “I didn’t mean to act like you’re not here. It’s just that --”

Ethan held up his hand. “Don’t explain. I more than understand.”

Violette moved to the center of the bed, clearly making a space for Ethan on her other side. She looked at him from under heavy lids and saw him respond with a deepening of his breath and of the chocolate hue of his eyes. His hands went to his jacket, and he shrugged out of it, dropping it on the foot of the large bed.

Charlie turned back to her, pushing her blouse back down her arms. She undid the cuffs and slid it off.

No sooner was it flung aside than Charlie pushed up her camisole and closed his warm mouth over one of her breasts.

Violette moaned softly and slid her fingers again into his hair, following his head as he suckled her nipple into hardness and then dragged his tongue across the valley between her breasts, circling it over her other nipple.

Ethan had finished undressing and stretched out beside her. She turned her face to his, and he leaned in to her, pressing his lips to hers. The kiss was almost sweetly shy at first, a soft brush of their lips together that just gave her a taste of him and a light whiff of his masculine scent. But then, a low moan erupted in his throat and he deepened the kiss, sliding his tongue past the seam of her lips, claiming her mouth more deeply.

Violette rested her palm on Ethan's broad chest. The silky hair rasped deliciously under her fingertips. A wave of boldness swept through her, and she felt a hunger to explore, to touch these men in a way she hadn't before. They had given her all the pleasure. She wanted to give some back. She let her fingertips slide down Ethan's stomach, the pads of her fingertips dipping between the sculpted etchings of muscle. She swirled her tongue into the recesses of his mouth as the fire swept inside her, fueled by Charlie's hungry kisses on her breasts.

She dragged her fingertips through the nest of dark hair below Ethan's navel and found his erection.

A soft groan vibrated from his throat into her mouth.

Emboldened by his show of enjoyment, she lightly closed her fingers around his shaft, sliding her palm up and down. The skin covering the veined hardness was smooth, like velvet, and Ethan's breath rasped with each stroke.

He closed a hand over hers, guiding the rhythm of her stroking and the tightness of her hand around his cock. She slid her thumb around the swollen head, dipping it into the tiny opening. Her exploration was rewarded with a groan.

Charlie lifted his face from her breasts and Violette became aware that he was watching her stroke Ethan. She turned and looked down at him. His lips were slightly parted and he was breathing heavily, his blue eyes smoldering as he watched her.

She sensed he wanted her to do the same to him. "Charlie," she whispered, reaching down with her other hand to the buckle of his trousers, but he backed away.

Her face burned, and she pulled her hand back. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to ..." She looked at Ethan.

"It's all right, Charlie. You can tell her."

Charlie looked down, as if avoiding her gaze.

"What is it? Please tell me?" Violette sat up and put a hand on his shoulder.

Finally he looked up at her again, his expression dark and troubled. "I have terrible scars, Violette. I don't want you to see them. When the rioting and fighting reached my post, I was shot. When I went down, a man came at me with a torch and set my clothing on fire. I rolled on the ground and managed to put it out, but not before it burned me."

Hot tears crowded her eyes. "My God, Charlie. What a horrible thing! I don't care if you have scars. I love you."

A shadow of doubt flickered through his eyes. "Thank you," he said in a near whisper. "It's just that once you see them ..." He fell silent, his terror of rejection almost palpable, the same terror that had helped keep him cloistered for so many years.

Violette reached up and touched his cheek. "I already felt the skin earlier, when we were together in the study. I already loved you and didn't care."

At her words, she saw much of the apprehension drain from Charlie's gaze. His hands went to his trousers and she watched him undo them and slide them off. He unbuttoned his shirt and collar quickly, dropping them to the floor. Her gaze remained riveted on him as he pulled off his undershirt.

He sat up, watching her expectantly. "They're mostly on my lower back and on one of my hips and legs."

Violette rose up on her knees and moved closer to him. She splayed her hands lightly on his broad chest, dragging her fingertips lightly through the dark golden hair covering it. Her palms smoothed upward over his shoulders and onto his back.

The feel of his muscles under her hands made her already aroused body feel as if it would melt completely. As her touch traveled down his back, her fingertips grazing ridges of muscle, she found she'd forgotten about the scars completely until she felt the damaged skin.

She leaned in and pressed her lips to the side of his neck, flicking the tip of her tongue against his skin, resting her hands completely on his lower back.

His breath sucked in lightly and he embraced her, slipping his large hands under her camisole, pulling her against him.

"You're magnificent, Charlie," she murmured against his skin. She dappled kisses down his throat and onto his chest, her palms sliding over his buttocks, squeezing them gently. A wave of hunger blazed through her, and she dragged the tip of her tongue across his nipples and then down the center of his stomach, following the trail of dark golden hair that funneled to his belly button.

Charlie groaned softly. The fingers of both his hands curled gently into her hair, following her head further down.

With trembling hands, she unbuttoned his drawers and opened them, sliding them past his hips and buttocks, letting his thick erection spring free. She noticed the scars splayed over his hips, continuing around his back and partway down one thigh. But the angry-looking red skin didn't affect her at all, except to make her feel she wanted to kill the person who'd done this to him. She grasped his shaft lightly in one hand and stroked it.

"Violette," Charlie rasped, his voice trembling and husky.

She closed her eyes and guided his cock to her mouth, closing her lips around the head and taking as much of his length in as she could. He tasted delicious and the velvety skin slid easily against her tongue.

Charlie moaned with each movement of her head. She was careful not to graze him with her teeth and made a suction with her lips, pulling gently on his shaft in an even rhythm.

Behind her, Ethan lifted her skirt. He reached up and pulled the string on her pantalettes, slipping them over her buttocks to her knees. His hands smoothed over her buttocks, the fingertips of one hand sliding between the fleshy lips of her sex, gently probing the swollen folds, spreading her open.

He pushed the head of his cock into her, his hands anchored on her hips.

Violette moaned and stuck her backside out further, giving him full access to her moist depths. She heard his breath hitch and in the next moment felt the satisfying slide of his full length, sheathing himself deep inside her.

Her eyes fluttered closed and she sighed, her lips still around Charlie's cock. She felt completely filled with man, her body melting, completely surrendering to carnal pleasure.

Time seemed to dissolve with only the delicious hardness of Charlie's shaft in her mouth, his moans in her ears, and Ethan's plunges deep inside her, each stroke shattering through her, sheathing him deep inside until his pelvis bumped against her buttocks sending another shock wave of pleasure through her sex. She was aware only of the change, of Ethan's last thrust and then the finality as he slid abruptly from her and spilled warm seed on her lower back.

Charlie, too, pulled out of her mouth and cupped her cheeks, thrusting his tongue hungrily between her lips.

Ethan wiped his seed from her back and then settled down next to her, caressing her back and buttocks and thighs.

Charlie pulled her camisole off of her and then grasped her arms, gently turning her onto her back again. He yanked her skirts down and pulled them off along with her pantalettes.

When they were both completely naked, he stretched out alongside her. He slanted his mouth over hers again and kissed her, long and deep, swirling his tongue in passionate strokes against hers while his hand caressed her shoulder, squeezed her breasts and wandered down her stomach.

She moaned softly and parted her legs for him, inviting his touch. He slid his fingertips between the soft folds and played with her clit, rubbing in tiny circles over the moist flesh.

He moaned softly into her mouth and dipped one finger inside her. His body surged against hers, obviously aroused further by the feel of her wet pussy. He rose onto his knees and lowered his face between her thighs, spreading her open with his thumbs and closing his mouth over her inner sex.

The exquisite pleasure sent her pelvis tilting off the mattress. Her fingertips dug into the bedding. She turned her head, her lips parted, only to have Ethan catch her mouth in a kiss. His tongue swirled hot and moist in her mouth, nearly matching the movements of Charlie's tongue on her clit.

When Ethan's hand closed over one of her breasts, his fingertips pinching and tugging the nipple, she exploded. The pleasure erupted, cresting in one blissful wave after another. Charlie kept licking the tiny nubbin, milking one tiny explosion after the other from her molten core. The explosions continued one after the other until there was nothing left and the sounds of her pleasure rang through the bedchamber.

Finally, she went limp, her pleasure-saturated body sinking deeper into the mattress.

Charlie looked up at her, his face darkly flushed, his lips glistening with her musk. As soon as their gazes met, he moved up on her, settling his body between her legs. He found her damp swollen opening easily and slid deep inside, filling her completely.

“Charlie,” she whispered, closing her arms around him. She smoothed her palms down his back and over his hips, completely accepting every inch of his skin, the smooth and the damaged portions, as part of him.

He slanted his mouth over hers, kissing her deeply as he moved inside her. After several minutes, he braced himself up on his palms, bridging her body and moved faster and harder. He pulled his mouth from hers. “I’m not hurting you, am I, love?” he whispered.

“Not at all.” She rose on her elbows and pulled her legs back, enjoying her plain view of his cock moving in and out of her.

“You like that, Violette?” Charlie said in a husky voice. “You like to see me fucking you?”

She looked up at him, startled at first at his question, but the blazing passion in his face, the feral hunger that had taken over, made her smile. “I love it,” she purred.

He groaned and pulled out, emptying his seed onto her stomach before collapsing next to her. He turned his face and pressed his lips to her cheek, resting there until his breathing had calmed. “Thank you, Violette,” he murmured, his breath pleasantly warm on her cheek.

Violette nestled between them. Ethan had been quietly watching them and now he handed Charlie another handkerchief to wipe her stomach.

“You needn’t thank me,” she said softly. “You’ve both made me very happy.”

Charlie wiped her stomach gently. “I didn’t mean for the lovemaking ... not completely. I meant thank you for not ... running away in horror when you saw the scars.”

Violette cupped his cheek. “There is nothing to run away from, Charlie.” She kissed his lips. “All I see when I look at any part of you is a man whom I’m falling madly in love with.”

Charlie pulled her into his arms. “Then it’s Ethan whom I should thank. He brought you here and wanted to share you.”

Ethan chuckled, caressing her hair. “You’re welcome, Charlie. Just consider it an act of enlightened self-interest.”

* * * * *

The following morning ...

Ralph Barnes stood at the roadside, waiting for Martin Poole's carriage to approach. He hailed down the driver. "Eh there, I'm on me way to the estate. I was hired to do some work in the house. Don't suppose ye'd mind letting me ride on with ye?"

The driver waved him to hop onto the driver's seat.

Barnes tipped his cap and levered his large frame up. He smiled to himself as the carriage began moving again. That hadn't been too hard. But then again, his employer told him that Martin Poole wasn't the brightest lamp on the street. Still, it shouldn't be this easy to earn a few crowns.

Once at the house, he helped the driver and the footman carry Miss Violette Poole's trunks to a bedroom on the second floor. He set down the trunk he'd brought and looked around the room, taking careful note of the French doors that faced out onto the terrace and back lawns.

A young maid, a pretty wench with blond hair, bustled in and stopped.

He turned from his position at the French doors and caught her looking at him curiously. Perfect. He gave her a smile and wink, adding a little bit more to the gestures than friendliness.

His tactic was rewarded by a bloom of color spreading across her pretty cheeks and a shy smile hinting around her lips.

"Nice room, ain't it?"

She nodded.

The footmen and driver had finished bringing in the other two trunks and had left.

Barnes took his time getting around to leaving. "These people live quite 'igh on the 'og, eh?"

The girl nodded. She turned quickly to one of the trunks as if to distract herself, and pulled a dress out of a trunk and hung it in a garderobe.

"What's yer name, love?" he asked, taking the tone that always got him under the skirts of barmaids.

She graced him with another shy smile, obviously enjoying his attention. After all, he wasn't a bad-looking fellow, he'd been told. Enough women liked big muscles and a set of blue eyes that raked over their tits.

"Charlotte," she said softly.

"Charlotte. Pretty name. It fits ye."

She smiled, the pink in her cheeks deepening.

"Ralph is my name."

She nodded and turned away in a shy manner.

"So, Charlotte, I've always wondered what these rich people do. Do they take a 'ot bath every day? Do they eat their toast and tea in the room? What?"

Charlotte looked at him, her eyebrows raised.

He chuckled. "I really want to know. They're a curiosity, ye know, like animals at the zoo. Now I've gone and met a real lady's maid, 'aven't I?"

She smiled, a bit of pride coming into her blue eyes. "I am one now. Miss Carrick's a cousin of the captains' and she's the lady of the house now. I'm to look after her myself."

"Ooh, you lucky lass. You'll be the envy of many a girl in service, won't ye?"

She smiled, her expression showing that the same thought had already crossed her mind many times. "I am lucky."

“So am I, to be talking to ye’s, that is, a pretty maid like yerself, and well employed at that.”

Charlotte cast her eyes down, obviously eating up his words. If his luck kept up, he’d have all the information he needed for his employer, not to mention enough crowns in his pocket to keep him in rum and women for some time.

He winked again and leaned toward her, making as if he wanted to know a secret. “Ye’ll be the only lass to ever tell me about the day of a real lady.”

She blushed again and shrugged, a doubtful yet coyly amused twinkle in her blue eyes. “Now, why would you want to know that?”

He smiled knowingly. “Who doesn’t want to know private things?”

She giggled. “You’re a right nosy bloke, aren’t you?”

He winked suggestively. “That I am, and more.” He watched her expectantly.

She appeared to debate momentarily and relent. “All right. I can tell you that a lady has her bath in the afternoon, getting ready for afternoon tea, you know? Then she’ll sit in the room a bit and look out the window. Perhaps she’ll sit and read. Miss Violette has only been here a day, but she will do those things, you know.”

“I’m sure she will.” His mind thought ahead to how long he would need to woo the girl to get an exact measure of her day. He looked at Charlotte. “When do ye ’ave some time off, Charlotte?”

Her cheeks flushed and she looked at him, wide-eyed. “Time off?”

He nodded. “Aye. I’d like to spend some time with ye, that is, if ye’ve a mind to.”

She looked at him wide-eyed, appearing suspended between feeling flattered and bewildered. Then that shy smile of hers came back to her lips. “Thursday. I have the afternoon to myself.”

“I’ll come for ye, then?”

She nodded. “All right.”

He bowed and swept off his cap, as if he were a real gentleman himself. "Til then, love." He replaced his cap and strode from the room.

Chapter Twelve

Almost three weeks later ...

“Charlotte, you look dreamy,” Violette said to the maid standing behind her at the vanity, brushing her hair. Charlotte had had the same expression on her face for nearly two weeks now. Definitely the signs of a young woman engaged in a romance. She should know, after having seen her own dreamy reflection every day since being with Charles and Ethan.

Charlotte gave her a shy smile, her eyes sparkling. “I’m sorry, miss. I don’t mean to --”

“Don’t be silly. You have that look about you.” She smiled at her. “What’s his name?”

Charlotte hunched her shoulders, leaning in conspiratorially. “Ralph, miss.” A look of concern clouded her eyes. “But don’t worry, miss, I only see him on my days off, like earlier today. We went on a picnic. I won’t let it interfere.” She put her attention back on her task, pulling the brush delicately through Violette’s hair.

“I wasn’t worried about that, Charlotte. You should be happy.” She tilted her head as the curiosity to know more about Charlotte’s romance overcame her. English servants tended to be so formal and Violette wanted to overcome the barrier since she enjoyed the company of a woman close to her own age. “What does he look like?”

The dreamy look deepened in Charlotte's eyes. "He's very tall, miss. With blond hair. Beautiful, like gold. And blue eyes, like mine. He's very big and strong."

"He sounds wonderful."

"Thank you, miss." She set down the brush and gathered Violette's hair into a swift bun so it wouldn't get wet during her bath.

When Charlotte had finished, Violette rose from her dressing room table. "Thank you for your help, Charlotte. I'll do the rest myself."

Charlotte curtsied. "Very well, miss."

When Charlotte had left, Violette took off her wrap and stepped into the tub of steaming water that had been prepared for her. She lay back and closed her eyes, allowing the rose scent in the water to seep into her senses.

Today was the first day since the confrontation with Graves that she felt more relaxed, as if she weren't always looking over her shoulder. Her father was still keeping an eye on the man in London and reported to her, Ethan and Charlie every day. So far, Graves seemed to be keeping his regular schedule of meetings and sessions in Parliament. There was gossip and speculation spreading in his social circle as to the status of his intended marriage, yet no scandal was immanent yet. Graves had been successful in keeping Violette's whereabouts from his peers, but at the same time, her father was suspicious of how very quiet he was actually being.

Ethan and Charlie always made sure one of them was in the house with her. Her bath time was really the only point in the day when she was by herself.

Something rustled in the room behind her. Violette opened her eyes. "Charlotte?"

No answer.

She smiled. It couldn't be Charlie. He was downstairs in his studio and wasn't yet ready to take the stairs with his cane. Perhaps Ethan had returned early from surveying the fields with the cottagers and had come to surprise her. "Ethan, is that you?"

A hand clamped over her mouth.

She gasped and struggled, but the hand held her mouth shut with an iron grip, pressing a rag to her face. She writhed, desperate to escape her attacker, but the acrid scent of a strange substance assaulted her nostrils.

She stopped struggling as the world descended into blackness.

* * * * *

Charlie flung the brush away from the canvas as if it had burned him. The most eerie chill passed up his spine, the way it had in India in the hours before the Mutiny had spread to his post. Something was dreadfully wrong.

“Dammit!” he cursed out loud and rose from his stool. He grabbed his cane and limped out into the hall as fast as he could. Something was wrong with Violette. He felt it deep in his bones. He called for help, yelling for Mason and Charlotte. The girl waited on Violette day and night. Surely, if something were wrong, Charlotte would know.

He went to the steps. Until now, he hadn’t actually tried to climb them, but now, he took them, one by one, propelled by the mounting fear burning in his chest.

“What is it, Sir Charles?” Charlotte’s voice sounded behind him. She took the steps until she had reached him, her face creased in concern.

“Where is Violette?”

“She’s in her bath, sir. I just left her rooms about five minutes ago.”

“Go there now,” he ordered. “Something is terribly wrong. Make certain she’s all right.”

“Yes, sir.” Charlotte lifted her skirts and ran up the stairs ahead of him.

Charlie had just neared the top step when a female scream rang out through the hall.

The sound froze his blood. "Charlotte!" he yelled, propelling himself up the last few steps. He pushed himself up with a hand on the banister and hobbled fast toward the sound of the screams.

The girl appeared in the doorway of one of the bedrooms, her face deathly pale. "She's not there, sir! She's not in her room! I swear I left her in the bath."

"Take me there!" he ordered. He followed Charlotte back into the bedroom and into the bath chamber. Violette's wrap lay draped over a chair. The tub was full of steaming water and puddles of water covered the floor all around the tub. The horrifying knowledge stabbed him and he looked at the maid who stood with her hands over her mouth. "Are you certain there was no one else here in the room with her?"

Charlotte's chest heaved and she stared at him, wide-eyed, her eyes brimming with tears.

"Speak, girl!"

She pulled her hands away from her mouth. Her lower lip trembled violently. "I'm certain, sir. We chatted about my day off and then she asked me to leave her to her bath." She looked at him. "Perhaps she finished and went for a walk?"

Charlie shook his head. "No." He looked down again, noticing that the water left a trail to the doorway.

He followed the trail of water to the French doors of the bedroom and gasped. The curtains blew gently in the breeze. He stepped onto the balcony and looked down. "No," he moaned, shoving a hand through his hair. "No." Tied around the balustrade was a rope.

He swung around to Charlotte, her blue eyes watching him with horror. "Tell one of the footmen to fetch Ethan now, tell him Violette's been kidnapped, and to saddle my horse! Have him tell my brother I'm already on my way to London."

"Yes, sir!" Charlotte turned in a swirl of skirts and went, the sound of her crying carrying in the air as she ran.

Charlie moved as fast as he could into the hallway and back down the stairs. Without bothering with his jacket, he made for the front door to wait for his mount. There wasn't one second to waste while Violette was in the hands of a ruthless monster.

God only knew what he would do to her.

* * * * *

Violette opened her eyes. The world was hazy, and she didn't remember when she'd fallen asleep. She went to rub her eyes and couldn't.

The pressure on her wrists and ankles slammed her into consciousness. She tried to sit up and felt the same pressure on her ankles. Then she remembered. The memory closed in on her with the force of an attack. She'd been in the bath when a strong hand clamped over her nose and mouth, forcing her to inhale something that made her black out.

Her eyes widened. The dark, terrifying realization of what had happened spread through her body with a chill like she'd never known. She tried to open her mouth to scream only to find it gagged. All she could do was utter a muffled cry.

She struggled vainly against her bonds. Whoever had bound her had tied her very tightly, making escape impossible. She went limp, staring up, her chest heaving. Panic rose sickeningly in her gut, but she struggled to tamp it down. She had to remain clear and calm if she was to get out of here. She decided to take stock of where she was first.

Next to her on a table was a lamp, illuminating the dark velvet of a canopy above her head. She was on her back in a large bed. Dark mahogany posters rose above her. A heavy comforter covered her. But in her struggle, it had slipped down, revealing to her that she was naked.

She whimpered. Not only had she been pulled roughly from her bath, but also whoever had done it had handled her naked body. God knew who else had seen her and handled her while she'd been unconscious! The thought caused the bile to rise again in her gut.

Merde! Ethan and Charlie didn't even know she was gone. But someone had certainly known when she'd be alone and most vulnerable. Gooseflesh erupted over her entire body. There was no doubt in her mind who had done this.

She lifted her head and looked into the shadowy depths of the room. The light just allowed her to make out a sitting area with a fireplace, a writing desk and windows covered with heavy drapes. The furnishings were dark, the aura of the room masculine. *Dieu!* There was only person who could have done this. She knew with chilling certainty that she was in Graves's bedchamber.

A door opened and closed.

Violette caught her breath, her body coiling with tension. She ached to cover her exposed breasts. Squeezing her eyes shut, she listened to the sound of footfalls approaching the bed. She knew exactly who it was.

His presence permeated the air as he came to a standstill at the side of the bed. She sensed his gaze raking over her exposed flesh.

"Violette, you are the most beautiful creature I've ever seen. Even more exquisite than your mother was."

His voice skittered through her like swarming insects. She hated hearing *him* speak of her mother. For the first time in her life, she understood how *Maman* might have gone to her father, not only because he had charmed her, but because, perhaps, he had offered her a measure of protection from Graves's unwanted attentions.

To her horror, Graves's weight sank into the mattress beside her.

Her eyes flew open and she tried to move away, silently cursing her bonds.

Graves sat horrifyingly close, leaning over her, his hungry gaze on her breasts. His hair was combed smoothly back, and he wore a quilted smoking jacket over his shirt and trousers. "Violette, no one is sorrier than I that it's come to this in order to have you with me." He reached out and skimmed his fingertips across her cheek above the gag.

She cringed, unable to move further than an inch or so away from his pursuing hand.

“How you wound me with your resistance, my dear.” His voice dripped with hurt. “There is no need. If you’ll just let yourself experience me, you won’t want to run away again.”

Violette struggled as much as her tight bonds would let her. As pathetically little she could twist away, she couldn’t keep his touch from skittering down her neck and onto her chest.

She screamed, the muffled sounds making her vividly aware that no one but Graves could hear her.

His hand covered one of her breasts and squeezed it.

She thrashed around, trying to shake him off, but his hand only tightened over the mound of flesh. She went still, tension coiled painfully through all her limbs and nerves.

His fingers palpated the swell of her breast, his eyes fluttering closed at the contact of his hand with her skin. His lips parted and a mangled sigh escaped his throat.

Violette whimpered. He made her feel dirty and violated. She yanked her body again in vain to escape him.

Ignoring her resistance, he squeezed her breast again, and then released it, exploring her nipple with his fingertips. A grin came to his lips as the bud puckered under his touch.

“Ah, see, Violette? If you let go, you’ll enjoy the pleasure I have to offer you.” He released her nipple and dapped his fingertips across her cleavage to her other breast, toying with it at his leisure. “I happen to know that most women have secret fantasies about lying helpless under a man’s domination.” He leaned over and pressed his lips to her cheek, just above the gag.

She cringed away from the malevolent feel of his lips and his breath on her skin.

“I am willing to bet you are a woman like that,” he breathed.

Violette jerked her head forward, butting his forehead hard with hers.

He bolted up, his hands on his forehead. "Ow! You little bitch!" He sprang from the bed, glaring down at her. "I was going to take it slowly with you. I was going to get you wet and panting, so there would be no coercion, only pleasure for you. But you've forced my hand more than once." He unbuttoned his jacket and tossed it to the floor. With his gaze pasted on hers, he undid his cuffs and collar.

Violette watched him, trembling. If no one came in to save her, Graves would rape her, and she would be helpless to defend herself.

On the street below, the sound of a carriage coming to a halt carried through the window. Her heart lurched and she prayed it was Charlie and Ethan. She watched Graves to see his reaction to the sound. To her relief, he didn't seem to hear it.

He unbuttoned his shirt and shrugged out of it, leaving it in a pile on top of his jacket. He slipped off his shoes and began to unbutton his trousers.

To her shame, hot tears crowded her eyes. She'd not wanted to do the nude painting because she never wanted Graves to see her body. Now, he had not only seen it, but he'd touched her and would take more if no one came to her rescue.

Graves added his trousers to the pile of his clothing on the floor and started undoing his drawers, against which Violette could see his erection straining.

She closed her eyes, bracing herself.

The sound of men's voices erupted in the hallway, coming closer. The bedroom door slammed open.

Violette's eyes flew open and she turned her head on the pillow.

To her shock, Papa stood just inside the doorway, a pistol aimed right at Graves's chest. "Stop right there, Graves."

Graves stood still for one moment, staring at the pistol. A wide grin spread over his face and he laughed. "Poole, you must be joking. You haven't the guts to fire that thing."

Her father returned Graves's stare. His eyes seemed to falter for one moment before a flicker of determination glowed in them. He aimed the pistol slightly to the right and pulled the trigger.

The bullet crashed through the window.

Graves glared at him. "You've gone mad!"

"Put your hands up now, or the next one goes straight into your heart."

Graves obeyed and another man rushed into the room, grabbing Graves and yanking his arms behind him.

Ethan!

"Come on, you bastard," he muttered, "The bobbies are right in the hall." He shoved Graves toward the door and out.

Violette heaved a sigh of relief and closed her eyes. Tears slipped from them and down her cheeks.

"Where is she?"

Another familiar voice sounded in the doorway, blocking Ethan from pushing Graves out into the hallway.

Charlie.

Thank God! She opened her eyes again and watched Charlie limp into the room without a cane. He stopped in front of Graves.

The next thing she knew, Charlie drew back a fist and slammed it into Graves's face.

The force of the punch caused Graves to fall back, but Ethan was behind him and held him on his feet. Charlie moved out of the way and Ethan shoved Graves out the door, into the hallway.

Charlie went immediately to the bed and covered her. Then he pulled the gag out of her mouth. "Violette, my God, are you all right?"

She looked up at him, flooded with the sweetest relief she'd ever known. Now that she was safe, tears slipped freely from her eyes. "Charlie," she whispered.

He untied her bonds with quick hands and then sank down next to her, pulling her into his arms. "Oh, Violette, I'm so sorry! I should never have let this happen. My beautiful girl." He held her close, his face buried in her hair.

Violette curled up in his arms, her tears escalating into guttural sobs.

He rocked her gently, like a child. "Thank God you're all right."

"Violette." Ethan's voice sounded quietly behind her. She felt his weight on the mattress on her other side, one hand coming to rest tenderly on her shoulder.

Charlie gently released her, and Ethan gathered her into his embrace. "My God, Violette, I'm so sorry. I should never have left you."

"It's no one's fault," she managed to breathe through her tears.

Ethan held her away from him, his gaze moving up and down her face. His dark eyes still simmered with anger. And yet, they also looked mournful. He pulled off his jacket and wrapped it around her. "We'll get to the bottom of this. I'll find out how he was able to pull this off."

"I just want to go home."

"Yes, Ethan," Charlie said, "Let's get her home."

"I have some clothes for her."

Violette looked up at the sound of her father's voice. He stood in the doorway, politely keeping his gaze turned away.

"Papa."

"Are you decent, Violette?" he asked.

"*Oui, Papa.*" Her voice sounded to her own ears like a little girl.

He turned and looked at her, his hazel eyes sad. "You haven't referred to me as *Papa* since you were a little girl. Not that you've had much occasion in your life to refer to me at all." He held a satchel in one hand. "I thought you might need these things. When Charlie found me and told me you'd been ..." He shook his head, as if deciding not to mention the word. "I knew you'd be here. Because I know Graves, I suppose." He advanced into the room and laid the satchel on the bed. "I underestimated him, however." He opened the latch on the bag. "I had a few things of your mother's in a closet at home. They should fit you."

Violette kept her gaze on him. He seemed different, somehow. He'd fired a pistol near Graves, threatening his life. "*Papa*, you were ready to kill him, *non?*"

Martin Poole nodded. "If he hadn't stopped hurting you immediately, yes."

"Thank you."

He smiled though his eyes were filled with sorrow. He reached into the satchel in and pulled out clothing. "They're a bit rumpled, I'm afraid. But they'll suffice to get you home."

"You'll come with us, I hope," Ethan said. "I'm sure Violette would like your company."

Her father's face lit up, and he cast her a hopeful look. "I would like that very much. Violette?"

She nodded. "I would, too."

He bowed his head. "I'll wait downstairs in the carriage so you can get dressed."

When her father had gone, Violette sighed and held up the articles of clothing he had brought her. "This was *Maman's*," she said softly, holding a chemise against her cheek. The faintest hint of perfume clung to the material, and she recognized her mother's scent. "I wish she were here."

Charlie reached out and caressed her hair. "Do you want us to go out while you dress?"

She looked up at him, feeling the panic rise. “*Non!* I don’t.” She glanced at Ethan and then back at Charlie. “I don’t want to ever be away from either of you again. As soon as we get home, all I want is for both of you to hold me between you.”

Ethan leaned over and kissed her forehead gently. “I think that can be arranged.”

Chapter Thirteen

Once she was settled in the carriage, nestled between Charlie and Ethan, Violette felt some of the tension drain out of her body. With a protective man on either side of her, pressed close to her, his hand in hers, she felt that she was no longer in danger.

As the carriage moved along the dark streets, she looked at her father whose face was just visible in the lamplight.

“*Papa*,” she said, “Will you please explain to me now what you wanted to tell me?” She looked at him, feeling hopeful. She’d always believed her father didn’t care about her. Her heart gave a small twist. She had believed for so long that her father didn’t love her, and yet, just a short time ago, he’d been prepared to kill a man in order to protect her. “I would really like to know what happened with you and *Maman*.”

Papa nodded. “I’ve been waiting a long time to tell you these things. I’ve ... not had the ... courage to stand up and come to you the way I should have. That is my greatest regret.” He paused and gazed briefly out the carriage window before looking back at her.

“When I saw your mother on stage so many years ago, I was very young. Just out of Oxford. I had always believed I wouldn’t fall in love with any one woman, and yet, it happened. I saw her on the stage and something changed inside me. Both Graves and I

wooed her, but she chose me.” A tiny smile came to his lips. “I couldn’t believe it. After all, Graves was tall and handsome and completely confident with women. Your mother, however, wasn’t taken in by his suave manner. Just as you weren’t.”

“We started an affair, and when she became pregnant with you, my parents insisted I marry her. No son of theirs was going to risk even the hint of a scandal.”

“*Maman* told me this part.”

He nodded, his eyes looking pained. “I see. Well, my parents ... your ... grandparents ... did not make her feel welcome. They brought her into their home, but not into their hearts. She was very unhappy in England and wished to return to France. I had a career and couldn’t go with her. I wouldn’t have been able to support her and you without it. I promised to visit her as often as possible, but once she left, my family always found reasons to delay my trips. Of course, it was up to me not to be controlled, but I allowed it. Even after my parents passed away, I felt so guilty about you and your mother for only having come to see you twice that I made up all kinds of excuses to stay away.”

“Finally, when I couldn’t live with myself anymore, I wrote to you, asking you to come here and live with me. When I extended the invitation, it was sincere. But when Graves found out you were coming to England, he pressured me to promise you to him. I allowed him to bully me because I felt so guilty toward him for winning your mother all those years ago. Well, that, and the fact that he had the power to ruin me financially.”

He sighed, his shoulders hunched. “Violette, my crime is that I’ve been a weak man. It’s an explanation. I don’t mean it at all as an excuse. Unfortunately, only the most drastic of circumstances allowed me to shore up any courage to defend you. I am truly sorry.” He leaned forward and touched her cheek, a pleading expression on his face. After a moment, he sat back, his hands in his lap, as if awaiting sentence.

Tears flooded Violette's eyes again. She had thought she would hate her father forever, but in the wake of his confession and the way he'd come to her rescue, she found her resentment melting away. "I forgive you, *Papa*."

Her father's eyes, too, misted over. "Thank you," he whispered.

* * * * *

Back at the house, the servants quickly gathered at the entrance, welcoming them home. Charlotte stood among them, her head bowed and shoulders hunched.

When Violette approached her, she could clearly sense the girl was avoiding her gaze. She put her hand on Charlotte's shoulder. "Charlotte, what's the matter?"

Charlotte burst into tears. "It's all my fault, miss! I'm the one who let him in! I didn't know!" She fell to her knees, ignoring the gasps of the other servants around her.

Ethan rushed to Charlotte. With two large hands on her arms, he dragged her to her feet. "Charlotte, let *who* in? Are you saying you know who did this?"

Charlotte lifted her face, streaked with tears. Wisps of her blond hair stuck to her cheeks. "He kept asking me what a lady does," she sobbed. "When she bathes. All kinds of things. I didn't know! I thought he liked me! Oh no!" She went limp, hanging like a rag doll suspended in Ethan's grip.

Violette caught her breath. She stood watching Charlotte cry, her heart pounding. Just hours ago, she'd been asking Charlotte about her romance with a man named Ralph. "Oh dear," she breathed.

Charlie clasped Violette's shoulder. "Violette, do you know of whom she's speaking?"

She nodded, still staring at Charlotte. "I believe so." She turned to him. "There is a man named Ralph who's been courting her these last few weeks. I believe he used her to get in to the house." She looked at Ethan. "It's not her fault, Ethan. Please don't be angry with her. She was used terribly."

Charlotte raised her head, gazing at Violette through her tears. "Thank you, miss. I'll never forgive myself."

Violette smiled at her. "It's all right, Charlotte. I'm home now and I'm safe. You're not at fault."

The girl shook her head vigorously. "I'll never let anyone get to you by me again, miss! I swear it by my own life!"

Violette smiled at her. "I believe you."

"Come now," Ethan said. He put a hand gently on Violette's back. "We're going to have a rest now before supper."

Charlie stepped forward and put his arm through Violette's.

Her father approached them. "I should return to London and contact the police about this."

Ethan nodded. "Very well. But please return tomorrow."

"Yes, *Papa*," Violette interjected. "Please come back tomorrow. You will, won't you?"

He embraced her. "I promise. No more broken promises."

He shook hands with Charlie and Ethan and then went back down the steps into the carriage.

The servants dispersed, leaving only Mason holding the front door for them. As they passed over the threshold, Violette felt a wave of warmth. In spite of what had happened earlier, this place was also where she'd come to be with Ethan and Charles. She'd found love here and nothing would ever change that. She'd come home.

The only thing left was for Ethan and Charlie to reclaim her. She still felt marred by Graves's touch. He'd seen her naked body. He'd touched her with his hand and with his lips.

Without speaking, she walked between Ethan and Charlie in the direction of Charlie's bedroom. Ethan closed and locked the bedroom door behind them and immediately began to undress.

The mere sight of his fingers on his cravat sent her body burning. She wanted only to be between him and Charlie, to feel their naked masculine bodies pressed to hers, enveloping her in protective strength. Only then, would she feel that her imprisonment by Graves was truly over.

She undressed quickly, laying her mother's underclothes, skirts, and blouse gently over a chair.

Charlie stood by the bed in his drawers and undershirt, gazing at her longingly. He pulled back the covers and took her hand, pulling her gently down onto the mattress.

She lay down on her back, staring up at him, yearning for him. She watched him unbutton his underclothes and pull them off, opening her arms to accept him gratefully when he climbed into the bed.

The heat of his body warmed her and his arms closed around her. "Violette," he whispered, pressing his face into her hair. His voice and his touch conveyed to her how grateful he was that she was home again.

Ethan sank onto the mattress on her other side, his strong form pressing close. He slid one arm over her stomach, spooning her back to his front, his lips brushing the nape of her neck.

"Oh God, I am so happy to be back with you both."

Charlie pressed soft kisses on her forehead while Ethan's hand slid down her waist, resting with warm gentle pressure on the swell of her hip.

Their surrounding closeness and male scents roused her. A demanding pulse sprang up in her sex and her breathing deepened. "Please make me yours again," she whispered.

Charlie smoothed back her hair. "You are ours, Violette. Always."

His words caressed her, but they were not enough. She looked at him. "Please. Every part of me."

He smiled at her, his blue eyes smoldering. "Of course, my love."

Ethan's hand circled over her hip. "This part is ours," he said, his voice husky and low. His erection rose and hardened, settling in the crevice of her buttocks. He skimmed his fingertips over one buttock, squeezing it. "This is ours, too."

Violette moaned softly. She smiled and her eyes fluttered closed. This was exactly what she'd meant.

Charlie smiled. "Those lips are ours," he said softly. He leaned in and kissed her mouth. His tongue feathered along the seam, and she parted her lips, a sigh slipping from her at the erotically moist warmth of his tongue against hers. His hand covered her shoulder, and he lifted his mouth from hers to kiss her bare skin. "That shoulder is ours." His fingertips caressed the curve of her neck and throat. "No one will touch any of these parts except for us."

Ethan had been caressing her buttock. His touch now slid down the length of her thigh, first the outside and then back up the sensitive skin of her inner thigh. "This thigh is ours."

Charlie gently turned Violette onto her back and pulled down the covers, revealing her. He put his hand on her other thigh and caressed it. "So is this one."

She moaned again and arched her back, as if to remind them about her breasts.

Ethan chuckled. "How could we forget these?" He moved his hand from her leg to her breasts. "These are definitely ours. And they are so beautiful." He covered a breast and gently squeezed it.

Violette shivered in delight, feeling his touch wash away Graves's touch.

He bent his head to her nipple and swiped his tongue over it, back and forth until it hardened.

"Yes, how could we forget?" Charlie covered her other breast and gently pinched the nipple, sending shock waves of pleasure cascading through her. He, too, lowered his mouth to the nipple and suckled it tenderly.

The sensation of two hot mouths tugging sensuously on her nipples sent her into mindless bliss. She closed her eyes, the fingers of both hands curled into their hair. The pleasure traveled down into her sex, which swelled and pooled with moisture.

Charlie lifted his face first, his blue eyes darkened to blazing azure, his face flushed. “There are more parts to reclaim,” he rasped. He slid his hand down her stomach, following his touch with a trail of kisses. He swiveled the tip of his tongue in her belly button while his fingers raked through her curls and teased the lips of her sex.

Ethan suckled harder on her nipple just as Charlie slid his fingertips between the moist folds of her pussy.

She cried out, her torso arching off the mattress.

Ethan lifted his face from her nipple and grinned down at her, his dark eyes smoldering like coals. “How can we reclaim that lower part of you at once?” he whispered in a velvety tone.

Charlie grinned. “Like this.” He slid two fingers into her, sheathing them deep inside. He pulsed them in and out. Ethan reached down and closed his fingertips over her clit, rubbing the moist hard nub in little circles.

Violette moaned, writhing her hips under their double touch. Her fingers grasped at the bedcovers, gripping them as an orgasm crashed through her. Wave after wave exploded. Neither Charlie nor Ethan stopped his intimate rubbing until she’d gone limp, her body saturated.

She opened her eyes and looked at them, her breasts heaving. “Thank you,” she whispered, feeling now that she was theirs again.

“You’re not fully reclaimed, Violette,” Charlie said, grinning.

Ethan turned her onto her side facing Charlie.

Charlie lay on his side and lifted her thigh, spreading her legs apart. He tilted his pelvis forward, spread her open with his other hand and slid his cock into her. He glided up and down several times, groaning softly. After several strokes, he pulled out.

Ethan moved closer into her from behind. Charlie held her leg up and Ethan slipped inside her. He, too, thrust a few times then pulled out, offering her to Charlie again.

Charlie smiled and pushed her onto her back. "Now you're fully reclaimed," he said softly. He settled himself between her legs and mounted her.

She smiled up at him. "I feel reclaimed." She smoothed her touch over his hips, accepting him deep inside her.

Charlie bridged her body with his hands in the mattress and glided in and out of her, looking down at her with his eyes full of tender passion.

Ethan turned onto his side. With his fingertips on her cheek, he tilted her face to his and claimed her mouth. His kisses were deep, hot and possessive. He kissed her until Charlie groaned in climax, his thrusting slowing as he came to fulfillment.

He rolled gently off of her, leaving just enough space between him and Violette for Ethan to climb onto her.

Ethan smoothed her hair back tenderly. "I hope there's no question that you're ours, my love," he rasped as he sheathed his cock deep inside her. He thrust in long, slow strokes, claiming her with the same passionate fervor as Charlie had.

Violette reached up, resting her palms against the flexing muscles of his chest. "No question at all," she whispered.

She pulled her legs back, giving Ethan the most access possible to her moist depths. She turned her head on the pillow to Charlie who leaned into her and kissed her, his tongue probing the soft recesses of her mouth.

Before long, Ethan groaned and Violette felt his warm seed pulsing inside her. He collapsed next to her and once again he and Charlie held her close between them, their bodies warm and damp from loving her. From claiming her.

Charlie sighed and caressed her hair while Ethan pressed a soft kiss into her shoulder. "Violette, I still feel terrible about what happened. I'm so sorry. I was right here in the house with you."

Violette heard his sorrow. His distress reverberated through her, the helplessness he'd also felt when he couldn't save his wife from being killed. She didn't know *how* she knew that, but she did. She cupped his cheek. "Charlie," she said softly, "I know how much you love me. I've never felt so safe and so cared for as I do here, with you and Ethan. The evil of others is not in our control. I know that if you'd even imagined him capable of sending someone into your home the way he did, you would have prevented it."

Charlie embraced her. She felt his relief and his sorrow as if it passed between them through their embrace. "Thank you, Violette." Suddenly, he looked up at her, his eyes misted over. "You understood, didn't you?"

She nodded. "Yes, I did."

Ethan reached out and squeezed his brother's arm. "I'm sorry for all you've suffered, Charlie," he said gently.

Charlie looked at him over Violette. "You've suffered too, you know. You've never wanted to admit it."

"Yes, that's true. But --"

"But nothing," Violette said. "We're here together now. That's what matters." She smiled and looked at both of them. "Now, please, just hold me some more."

Without another word, both men moved in closer to her and held her in the cocoon of their arms.

Violette closed her eyes, feeling a pleasant drowsiness come over her. She remembered something *Maman* had once told her when she was a little girl. It was something about not ever getting in between people.

However, *Maman* hadn't been speaking of a situation like this.

She smiled again, drowning in contentment. *Non*, getting between people, well, two handsome loving men like Ethan and Charlie, had been the smartest thing she could ever have done.

 THE END 

Sedonia Guillone

Sedonia Guillone lives on the water in Florida in winter and on the rocky coast of Maine in summers with a Renaissance man who paints, writes poetry and tells her she's the sweetest nymph he's ever met. When she's not writing erotic romance, she loves watching spaghetti westerns, cuddling, and eating chocolate.

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