

# LOVE'S REVENGE

By

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For Cathy Gosney,  
who at the age of 40  
finally discovered what a romance book was.  
Thanks for being my first and biggest fan.

And with thanks to Charlotte Featherstone  
for pushing me to make Devlyn a true Alpha

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## Chapter 1

"Fischer!" Quentin Blackwell, Earl of Devlyn, hollered for his butler as he strode through the front door of his country home. Behind him trailed two enormous wolfhounds. As Devlyn halted in the foyer, he peeled off his riding gloves and slammed his crop down on the long table braced against the wall.

The mirror overhanging the furniture flashed his reflection at him, and he grimaced at his appearance. He was a mess. The sleeve of his jacket was ripped at the shoulder and a smudge of dirt streaked its way across his browned cheek, emphasizing the scar that ran from his ear almost to his mouth. Shoving a hand through his tousled black hair, he turned and headed toward his study.

With each stride he took, his fury grew. If it were the last thing he did, he'd make Spencer Hamilton rue the day he'd picked a fight with the Devil of Devlyn's Keep. The insolent pup.

"Fischer," he roared. "Where the devil are you?"

The door to the study slammed backward against the wall as he stormed into the room. A moment later he was splashing a stiff shot of whiskey into a glass. Tossing the liquor down his throat, he relished the burning sensation. Where the hell did the boy get the idea that his sister was the injured party in their brief affair almost five years ago?

No doubt, Eleanor was responsible for the boy's misconceived notions as to his sister's innocence. The idea infuriated him. A sudden snap rent the air as the glass he held shattered under the weight of his grip.

"God damn it!" He grimaced as shards of glass bit into his hand. "Fischer! Get the hell in here!"

Whipping a handkerchief out of his pocket, he proceeded to clean the small cuts lacerating his palm. Behind him, he heard footsteps hurrying into the study.

"I'm sorry, my lord. There was a minor catastrophe in the kitchen and Cook required my assistance." The sparse looking man eyed Delyn's appearance with an arched eyebrow. "Another brawl, my lord?"

Devlyn glared at his butler, manservant and all around man of affairs. When one's finances were in such a miserable state as his, he was fortunate to have a loyal retainer like Fischer. But the man had the ability to make him feel like a chastened schoolboy at times. And today wasn't a good day for being chastened.

"I never brawl, Fischer."

He clenched his teeth at the skeptical look the man gave him. At least not anymore he didn't. Granted, the man had dressed his wounds from more than one brawl in the past. The last time had been when a sailor had sliced his cheek open two years ago. It had taught him to curb his temper and walk away from a fight. Now as Fischer studied him with an air of disappointment, he grimaced.

"If you must know, the baron's youngest offspring discovered I'd returned and tried to avenge his sister's supposed honor."

"I see."

"Damn it, Fischer. Even you think me guilty."

"Not at all, my lord. I know you too well to imagine you capable of betraying Miss Hamilton."

Devlyn turned away abruptly at the statement. No, he would never have betrayed Eleanor. He'd been in love with her. The day she'd broken his heart, he'd set out to earn himself the title, Devil of Devlyn's Keep. He'd explored every debauched sin and deed in the past five years with the sole purpose of obliterating her from his mind.

Until today, he'd been successful in doing so. Then Hamilton had accosted him at the pond this morning, ripping open the wound he'd thought scarred over completely. But it wasn't the wound he'd expected. For the first time today, he realized he didn't love Eleanor. Probably never had. No, what had scarred him was the injustice of it all.

Shrugging out of his torn jacket, he tossed it to Fischer. "See that it's mended. I don't know when I'll have funds to purchase a new riding coat."

The humiliating statement made him twist his lips in a bitter grimace. Eleanor Hamilton had done her work well the day she'd betrayed him. Running to her father, Eleanor had convinced Baron Townsend to avenge her so-called honor. The man had made it his business to destroy what little of the Devlyn fortune still existed. The bastard had almost succeeded. If it hadn't been for his attorney's quick thinking to shift his investments, he'd be destitute.

As it was, he retained his townhouse in Mayfair, Devlyn's Keep here in Shellingham and a few small investments that provided him with enough to live on if he was frugal with his spending. At least until his American investments came to fruition, which he expected sometime in the very near future.

"Perhaps you might forgo my salary this month, my lord. I think it might afford you at least a new coat. This one is rather worn. I'm surprised the sleeve hasn't ripped before now."

The man's generous offer made Devlyn tighten his jaw. He often forgot how much Fischer truly was a

part of his family. He was the last living Devlyn, and Fischer had been with him throughout his younger years. Forcing a smile to his mouth, he shook his head.

"I'm not that destitute, Fischer. You'll have your salary as always, and you can't say you don't earn every farthing."

"No, my lord. Indeed I can't." Folding the coat over his arm, the manservant nodded toward Devlyn's hand. "Shall I send Cook in to look at that hand?"

"No, I'll be all right. That will be all, Fischer."

"My lord." The manservant bowed and left Devlyn alone with his thoughts.

Eleanor. He wanted to wring the bitch's neck, slowly squeeze the life out of that dainty, golden-haired body of hers. No, that would be too easy a punishment for her. No. He wanted to humiliate her. Make her pay for the lies she'd told and the humiliation he'd suffered. And he wanted to make Townsend pay for trying to strip him of his fortune.

He'd been the innocent and gullible fool throughout the entire thing. Eleanor had simply used him to avoid the scandal her pregnancy would have wrought. When she'd declared him the father of her child little more than a month after he first bedded her, he should have known something was amiss.

Unwrapping his cut, he stared down at the miniature lacerations already puffy and red. He reached for the brandy and poured a small amount of the liquor over his palm. He grimaced. The stinging reminded him of Eleanor's betrayal. He'd been oblivious to every one of her faults.

Instead, he'd allowed love to let him believe her lies. He'd even come close to marrying the woman. Never again would he allow his heart to blind him in such a way. No doubt, she would have continued her whoring after they were married. But fortunately, he'd caught the bitch and her lover rutting like common beasts in one of the Townsend's horse stalls.

It had hardly been surprising to see Eleanor turn into a raving witch when he'd broken their engagement. Then when Townsend had confronted him over the matter, things had only gotten worse. Eleanor claimed the child was his and Townsend hadn't needed anything else to propel him into action.

Then, in less than a week, the bastard had put him on the edge of financial ruin, while Eleanor had married some unsuspecting member of the peerage a few weeks later. Thoroughly disgusted, he'd traveled to America to try to rebuild his fortune. And while he was there, he'd taken it upon himself to explore every debauchery he could find. In doing so, he'd achieved a modicum of success, not only in his sinful endeavors, but in his financial situation as well. Still it would take several more weeks before his ventures turned profitable.

He wrapped his cuts with the clean side of his handkerchief and moved to stand behind his desk. With his uninjured hand, he sifted through a thin pile of invitations. Word had already spread throughout the county that a Devlyn was once again entrenched in the keep. He smiled cynically. It seemed his neighbors were more than ready to overlook his past transgressions. Well, to hell with them. To hell with every one of them.

"My lord." Fischer's voice ended on a high-pitched note pulling Devlyn's gaze up with a jerk. Whatever had gotten his manservant into a state of apoplexy had to be important.

"What is it, Fischer?"

"It's a lady, my lord."

"A lady?"

"Yes, my lord. But ... well, I'm afraid...."

"Out with it, man!"

"It's Miss Hamilton."

His body snapped to attention, his limbs rigid with tension. Eleanor. No. She was married now. She wouldn't use her maiden name. Her sister most likely, hoping for a verbal duel with him as opposed to the physical one he'd endured with the youngest Hamilton. Her visit would no doubt be quite interesting. "Send her in, Fischer. Send her in."

"Very well, my lord."

A moment later, he watched a tall, lushly figured woman enter the study. Caesar and Beast immediately stood up and approached the woman. Despite their size and fierce appearance, the wolfhounds were gentle creatures, but his visitor couldn't have known that. He waited for her to draw back in fear. Instead, she scratched Beast under the chin and tugged on Caesar's ear before straightening.

Dressed in a royal blue riding habit trimmed in black, there was a mysterious quality about her. Black netting covered her face and he couldn't distinguish her features. The woman made a slight curtsy then inhaled a deep breath. Behind her, Fischer closed the door to the study. She jumped at the quiet sound of the latch falling closed.

"Lord Devlyn. I hope you'll forgive my intrusion. I'm sure it's unexpected." The husky sound of her voice tickled his spine. It intrigued him.

He gestured toward the chairs in front of his desk and waited as she sat down. There was a fluid grace to the way she moved. It reminded him of a sleek cat. The dogs trailed after her, and he scowled at the traitors before ordering them to return to their usual resting place. Sitting down, he leaned back in his chair and threw his feet up onto the desk. It was a rude gesture and he knew it. Her body stiffened in response, and he smiled with just a touch of derision. Had she really expected him to be a gentleman? He'd dispensed with gentlemanly behavior a long time ago. The Devil of Devlyn's Keep answered to no one and did as he pleased.

"So tell me, Miss Hamilton, to what do I owe this honor?"

"I ... I came here with a ... a proposition for you, my lord."

"A proposition." He arched an eyebrow at her. The woman had definitely piqued his interest. "Do go on."

"I'm here to offer you revenge."

The words made his limbs tighten with tension. What exactly was this hussy up to with her offer of revenge? Revenge for what? Despite her efforts to hide her trepidation, he saw her hands tremble, and the netting over her face quivered from her rapid breaths.

From the tremor that shook her, he knew his insouciant reaction intimidated her. He smiled slowly, the slight curl of his lip tilting upward on one side. Although he couldn't see his own features, he knew his smile emphasized the scar on his face. Women had told him it gave him a dangerous look.

"What an intriguing concept. Revenge on whom?"

"My sister, Eleanor."

He'd expected the words, but they surprised him nonetheless. So this was the mysterious Sophia Hamilton, Townsend's eldest brat. He'd never met Eleanor's only sister. She'd been away in Scotland while he was courting Eleanor.

"You're willing to betray your only sister?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

A shudder shook her body as he watched the netting covering her face stir with her accelerated breathing. The sight fascinated him for some reason. It reminded him of how fast a woman breathed when she was on the threshold of a climax during lovemaking.

"Because what my father and sister did to you was wrong. Eleanor ... Eleanor has always been spoiled. She's only ever cared for herself, and my father has simply catered to her every whim."

"This is all quite fascinating, but you'll forgive me for being just a tad skeptical as to your offer."

"Of course, I understand. But I assure you, my lord, I'm most serious about this. I have information that will allow you to recoup what my father stole from you, and at the same time, you'll have the opportunity to confront Eleanor with her lies and deceit."

"You've still not really answered the question of why. Why are you willing to betray your father and sister?"

Confusion and trepidation radiated out from her. She sprang to her feet, twisting her hands around the riding crop she carried. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come. Please ... please forgive my intrusion."

Not about to let her leave without learning more, he scrambled to his feet and pursued her to the door. Her hand was on the knob when he braced his palm against the wooden barrier, preventing her escape. She immediately took a step back and he followed. Her height amazed him. If he lifted her veil, she'd be almost eye to eye with him. And something made his hand itch to remove that netting, but he refrained for the moment. Instead, he trailed his forefinger along the edge of her jaw, the coarse netting hiding the softness he was certain lay beneath the veil. It aroused him.

"Surely you don't think I'm going to let you leave without discovering why you're willing to betray your family."

"Please, my lord. It was a mistake to come here."

"Perhaps, but nonetheless, I'll have an answer from you."

"Or what?" The sudden challenge in her voice amused him. At least she had backbone.

"Hmm, what could I do to persuade you to answer?" His fingers touched the snowy cravat tied around her neck. With a lazy movement, he gently tugged at one of the ties. Her cravat tumbled open to expose her creamy throat. God, she was a tempting wench. She gasped as he pressed his thumb against the hollow of her throat. Again, the netting fluttered wildly against her face.

"My lord, please."

"Please is a subjective word, Miss Hamilton. Are you asking me to do something wicked? Or are you begging to tell me your reasons for this interesting proposition of yours?"

"I ... I wish to ... oh bloody hell!"

Her abrupt response was so completely unexpected he jerked back in surprise. She began to pace the floor in front of him, and his eyes narrowed as he watched her prowling. Again she reminded him of a cat. After a moment of tense silence, she stopped and whirled to face him.

"My lord, I came here to offer you revenge on Eleanor and my father because I want revenge too. You weren't the only one they betrayed. They betrayed me as well."

"I see." He folded his arms across his chest and waited.

"When Eleanor became pregnant with her lover's child, she needed a husband. You suited her purpose, but when you refused to marry her, Father helped her steal my fiancée instead."

"You were engaged to that weakling, Shively?"

"Yes. He was ... he was my last hope."

"Last hope?"

"Yes. I'd already given up hope of ever marrying until I met Andrew. I was never the pretty one in the family."

He watched her take a deep breath as she slowly reached up toward the netting covering her face. As she revealed her features, he eyed her with curiosity. For someone who believed herself unattractive, she was quite the opposite.

Although she wasn't a beauty by any stretch of the imagination, her hazel eyes were large and echoed with warmth, while her complexion was smooth and creamy. Wisps of brown hair framed her heart-shaped face and her full mouth pouted in a manner that brought his cock to attention. The reaction startled him. Clearing his throat, he turned away from her.

"I think you underestimate yourself, Miss Hamilton. I'm sure there are plenty of men willing to offer for you."

"No, my lord you're wrong. Offers of marriage have been nonexistent for many years."

"Come now, I think you exaggerate."

"Do I?" With his back to her, he could almost see the small shrug of her rounded shoulders. "Perhaps. Well, my lord, you've received the answer to your question. Now if you don't mind, I should like to



leave."

He didn't want her to leave. She intrigued him and something about her made him feel protective of her. Eleanor had hurt her too. He understood that pain.

"Before you go, why don't you tell me what you'd hoped to receive in exchange for this method of revenge you offer me?"

"Marriage."

Stunned, he spun around to stare at her. "Marriage? To me?"

"Yes."

"Good God, woman. Whatever made you think I'd make a suitable husband?"

"I didn't. In fact, I knew you would be far from the ideal husband."

"Then why settle for me? I'm sure there are any number of men willing to marry you."

She heaved a sigh of annoyance. "I'd heard you were intelligent, my lord; however, I'm beginning to have my doubts. I'm Eleanor's older sister. What man would want to marry me?"

"I can only guess at your age, but since Eleanor is younger than I am, I'd say you're about my age."

Her pink mouth formed a moue of astonishment before she burst out into laughter. It was a pleasant sound. "Oh my word. I must admit to being extremely flattered. But you see, my lord. I'm much older than your tender years."

Irritated by her amusement, he frowned. "I'd hardly refer to the age of thirty-two as my tender years."

"It's quite tender when I consider my own age of forty-one."

The comment made his jaw sag. How was it possible that this attractive woman could possibly be so much older than him? She hardly looked old enough to be his age, let alone having almost ten years on him. Impossible.

"You jest."

"No, my lord. Sadly enough I'm an old maid. Any hope of marrying vanished five years ago when Eleanor ran off with my intended."

"And yet you still want to marry?"

"Yes. I want to experience what it's like between a man and a woman." She blushed and it made her look like a fresh debutante. "I could pay for the experience I suppose, but I'm not quite that bold. Coming here was the boldest thing I've ever done."

The idea of teaching this woman about the pleasures of the body captured his imagination. An older woman who'd not yet been initiated into the art or power of lovemaking. An intriguing possibility. His cock stirred again. He stepped toward her and traced the curve of her mouth with his forefinger before his thumb pressed down on her lower lip. It was plump and tender.

He heard the sharp intake of her breath. It excited him. When was the last time he'd had the pleasure of initiating a novice? Years. The scent of lilacs drifted up into his nose as he lowered his head toward her.

"And you're willing to put yourself completely into my hands?"

"Ye-yes."

"Are you certain of that? I've not earned my title without a great deal of wickedness."

"Your sexual prowess has always been widely touted in social circles. I doubt you've acquired more deviant practices while in the colonies." The pulse at the side of her neck fluttered beneath her skin. He excited her. A smile tilted his mouth and he leaned forward until his lips were just a hairsbreadth away from her shell-shaped ear.

"I believe you'll find the social circles are only half accurate. I'm far more decadent than any rumors you may have heard."

"Oh," she breathed.

"So shall we strike a bargain then? My name and experience for the means to avenge myself."

Speechless she barely nodded her head. What the hell was he doing? A wife? He studied the woman in front of him closely. Perhaps it was time to try for an heir, and he could do much worse than this delectable creature. And if the woman didn't give him a child, then his cousin's brat could inherit for all he cared.

Another smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he watched excitement and trepidation flash across her features. Her heart had to be pounding in her breast. He glanced down at the snug fit of her royal blue habit. And they were firm, plump looking breasts too. It was difficult to believe she was so much older than him. The anticipation of the decadent pleasures he wanted to introduce her to as his wife made him

grow hard as a rock. His lips curled into a deeper smile as he pinned her with his gaze.

"Then we're agreed. Revenge and nights of pleasure. A decidedly decadent proposition."

## Chapter 2

Sophie stared into the features of the man who'd just agreed to marry her. She was mad. Stark raving mad. Her tongue darted out to lick her dry lips, and Devlyn growled low in his throat. It was a predatory sound. She wasn't surprised at all when excitement skimmed its way through her blood.

She took a quick step back. Not because he intimidated her of course, but because.... Heavens! Of course the man intimidated her, not to mention disturbed her. Something about this man said his kisses would be potent and heady. Completely unlike the brief caresses she'd received in the past.

Devlyn's mouth tilted upward on one side in that dangerous smile of his. It emphasized his scar, making him every inch the wicked rogue people claimed he was. It also made him look quite capable of breaking her heart if she allowed him to do so. But she would ensure that wouldn't happen. This was strictly a means to escape her father's tyranny and experience the pleasures a man of Devlyn's reputation could offer her.

"Are you having second thoughts, my lady?"

"Most certainly not." She straightened her spine and tilted her head at a proud angle.

"You don't appear all that certain."

"And exactly how do I look?"

"Like you're afraid I'm going to take a bite out of you."

"You exaggerate, my lord."

The swiftness of his movement caught her by surprise as he reached out and pulled her against him. The scent of sandalwood teased her senses as her face came within inches of his. Even through her gown, she could feel the heat of him warming her body. What would his bare skin feel like against hers? His finger traced her lips, and she trembled at the intimate touch. Was he going to kiss her? The green eyes staring into hers took on a lazy gleam as he studied her.

"Exaggeration is for the timid, my dear Sophie, and I'm far from timid. But be assured of one thing. When I take a bite out of you, and I will." His lips brushed over hers in a feathery caress. "I promise you'll never forget my doing so."

Good Lord, if she didn't take care, this man would rule her heart with just the sound of his voice. She had to do something to restore the balance of power between them.

"And I'm sure you'll never forget my letting you, my lord."

"Touché. It seems you're as eager as I am. I suggest we dispense with the formalities of an engagement and marry three days from now."

"Three days! I don't think--"

"I have a feeling you think far too much. But I have just the thing to keep you from thinking."

His features blurred as he captured her mouth. The touch of his lips against hers was warm and sultry. No one had ever kissed her like this before. The heat of it spread its way into her body, igniting a fire inside her belly she didn't know how to quench. Weak at the knees, she fought to keep her senses from reeling.

Without thinking, she kissed him back. His tongue swept into her mouth, and she moaned with delight. Heat raced through her body, and she wanted to sink into him, melt into him until he did whatever he wanted with her.

This was something she hadn't anticipated. She'd never expected to feel so wanton, so eager for him to take her to his bed. Sweet Lord, this was beyond her wildest dreams. Restraint. She needed to come to her senses. Desperate to regain control of the situation, she turned her head away from him to break the kiss.

Immediately, he released her. Devoid of his heat, a chill swept over her. She didn't like the cold sensation. She wanted the warmth his touch gave her. He'd released her so abruptly. Still shocked by the wanton feelings he'd aroused in her, she kept her eyes averted.

Had he simply been playing with her, toying with her? She'd responded to his touch like a woman starved

for love and affection. Well, she might crave love in her life, but pity was the last thing she wanted from anyone, least of all this man. She might be an old maid, but she still had her pride.

"My lord, I'm ... perhaps this is a mistake."

"No, Sophie, it's not a mistake to feel desire."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do."

God in heaven, this man made her feel like an innocent, despite the fact that she was so much older. How could she marry a man so much younger than herself? Not only was it unheard of; it just wasn't done. She winced and forced herself to look at him. She expected amusement, but the assessment and curiosity brightening his green eyes surprised her.

"My lord, I made a terrible mistake in coming here today. I don't think I can do this."

"I see."

"I am sorry, but it's just that ... that I'm ... well I'm much too old for you. I'm certain you'll need an heir, and the possibility of me bearing children is questionable. Then of course, there's the age issue. I don't see, even if I could give you an heir, how I'd be a suitable mother. I'm sure you've plenty of younger women from whom you can select a bride. I just don't think this--"

"Enough." The harshness of his voice scraped a chill down her spine. She would not want to cross this man. She didn't move or speak as he folded his arms and glared at her. "I can't abide prattling in anyone, least of all a woman."

"I was not prattling." He arched a stern eyebrow at her. She went silent.

"You have something I want, Sophie. You offered it in exchange for my name. I agreed to the arrangement. You might be having second thoughts, but I don't intend to let you or my chance for vengeance slip away."

"But you don't understand--"

"I understand perfectly. I excite you, and that frightens you."

"Now you're being arrogant."

"Simply because I'm younger than you, it doesn't make me a fool. You might be older, but I have experience beyond your tender education. Experience you covet."

She flinched at his confident tone. He was right. She was a frightened spinster who was terrified of what this devastating rogue might do to her heart. His reputation for breaking hearts was well known to her, and she had no desire to relive the pain she'd experienced when her sister had stolen Andrew from her.

More than that, she hated to admit he was right. She'd offered him something in exchange for his name. He'd agreed, and honor dictated she not renege on the offer. The calculating gleam in his green eyes was intimidating. It made her wonder if he could read her thoughts.

Well, she refused to let him intimidate her. All her life, she'd allowed her father to bully her. She refused to give her husband-to-be the same power. When she married, she would lead her own life and Devlyn would lead his. That's how all her friends' marriages worked. It would be no different for her. After all, wasn't she simply buying a husband with her offer of revenge? Determined to regain her footing on the slippery slope she was climbing, she sent him a forthright look.

"You're correct, my lord. I proposed a bargain to you, you accepted. It would be dishonorable of me to back out of the agreement."

"Then it's settled. Now then, I want to know what you're going to tell your father."

"My father?" She flinched. She didn't want to think about her father. Lord she'd been a fool to start down this disastrous path.

"Surely you didn't think he would just let you waltz down the aisle with me."

"No, but in all honesty, I didn't expect you to agree to my proposition." For the first time, she realized it was true, she really hadn't expected him to say yes to her proposal. A small smile twisted the corner of his mouth.

"Well, now that I've agreed, we need a plan."

"A plan?"

"Yes, a plan. Tomorrow, I'll procure a special license and we'll marry in three days. I believe my vicar is still in residence at the Devlyn parish. He can perform the ceremony. With regard to your father and sister, I believe surprise is the best tack to take."

"But--"

"Are you familiar with the trail that winds through the glen toward the old woodcutter's cottage?"

"Yes."

"Meet me there tomorrow at noon. I'll bring a lunch basket."

"I'm sorry, my lord, but I don't understand."

"How long have you known me, Sophie?"

The question stunned her. How long had she known him? Less than an hour if the mantel clock was accurate. "Not long, my lord."

"Precisely. The gossips will wag their tongues at our alliance, but if we spend time together before our marriage, we can honestly say we courted in secret. It will protect your reputation to some degree."

He was worried about her reputation? It was an honorable gesture, and it warmed her heart. She'd learned a long time ago not to believe anything her father or Eleanor said, but her friends had hardly been complimentary about this man, either. Her face must have signaled what she was thinking as his mouth twisted into a derisive smile.

"My reputation for debauchery doesn't mean I have no honor."

There was just a tinge of bitterness in his voice. It was deeply buried, but she sensed the pain and resentment. She shook her head. "I try never to listen to gossip. Invariably, it proves false in the end."

"So, I'm to marry an innocent philosopher who craves excitement." The gentle teasing made her cheeks hot. She bowed her head, but a firm hand cupped her chin, forcing her to meet his gaze. "Remember, Sophie, desire is not shameful, but lying to one's self is."

"And you call me a philosopher?"

He laughed. It lightened his dark features and made him look like a youth far younger than his thirty-two years. "Just remember that I also hold the title of rake as well."

The wicked glint of humor in his eyes made her want to laugh, but she offered him a smile instead. She would need to guard her heart well. Despite what she'd heard about this man, he was far more enigmatic than she'd ever expected. Marriage to him might be more exciting than she'd ever dreamed possible.

\* \* \* \*

Sophie quietly entered the back door of Townsend Hall and hurried up the back stairs. Inside her room, she breathed a sigh of relief. Deceiving her father wasn't going to be an easy task. She'd never been very good at lying.

It didn't matter. She had to do this. She needed to escape this stifling environment, and if it meant righting the wrong Eleanor and Father had perpetrated against Devlyn, then all the better. No one deserved having their life and fortune destroyed on the whim of a spoilt woman.

And she wanted them to acknowledge her pain as well. But more than that, she wanted freedom--freedom to enjoy life and not rot away working as her father's bookkeeper. With a sigh, she quickly shed her riding habit.

As she tossed the garment on the four-poster bed, she caught a glimpse of herself in the full-length mirror. She paused and faced her reflection. The woman staring back at her didn't look forty-one. In fact, she looked much younger.

With an astute and critical eye, she scanned the mirror's offering. Brown hair that had a tendency to curl when wet. No facial wrinkles, a smooth complexion, firm breasts--even if they were a bit too large. Hips a bit too wide, but not overly so. Through her sheer chemise, she could see legs that were full and plump. She might have the body of a young woman of marriageable age, but it didn't help her forget her age.

With a final glare at her reflection, she turned away and retrieved a day dress from her wardrobe. The serviceable poplin reminded her of the tasks she still had to accomplish today. Father would be far from pleased. She would just have to beg his forgiveness. Although that was something he rarely gave her.

The grandfather clock in the main hall chimed its onerous announcement of the hour, and she darted from her room to race downstairs for lunch. As she reached the foot of the stairs, her brother Spencer strode out of the library. He was young and impetuous, but had a giving heart. The bond between them was not only strong, but quite special despite their twenty-year age difference.

As she caught a glimpse of his face, she gasped in horror at the black eye he sported, and the abrasions on his cheek. "Dear heaven, Spencer, what happened to you?"

"Now don't you start in on me too, Phe." Her brother sighed as he used the nickname he'd had for her since his childhood. "It's not as bad as it looks."

Stepping up to him, her fingers gently turned his face toward the light. "Have you had Mrs. Hobarth look at this?"



"Yes, it's just a few bumps and bruises. Nothing more."

"Has Father seen you?"

"Yes, and believe it or not, he actually said he was proud of me."

"Proud of you for brawling." She spat out her disgust. "Who did you fight, some mortal enemy of the Townsend clan?"

"Actually, yes. I found out Devlyn was back in residence at the keep. I sought him out this morning at the pond."

Dear Lord, it was a wonder the man had even received her this morning after what Spencer had done. No doubt, Eleanor had filled their only brother's head with falsehoods and pleas for justice. She needed to clarify things with him at the appropriate time. She wasn't about to have him and Devlyn employing their fists on a regular basis.

"Well, your eye looks like it's going to shine for at least a week, maybe more."

"I don't mind, Phe." He leaned toward her with a conspiratorial smile. "Don't tell Father, but the man was quite an excellent pugilist. He beat me fair and square."

"But a brawl, Spencer." She shook her head with reluctant amusement. Unwilling to chastise him any further, she entwined her arm with his and pulled him toward the dining room. "Promise me you'll not harass the earl anymore. I don't want to see you hurt."

"If it makes you feel better, I promise. But you need to stop mothering me. I'm quite capable of handling myself."

"I'm sure you are, but--"

"Damnation, woman, let the boy alone and let him get in here to eat." The bellow that echoed out of the dining room shattered the lighthearted atmosphere, and Sophie immediately pulled away from her brother.

As she took a seat opposite Spencer at the table, she clenched her teeth at the way her father ignored her. Well into his sixties, Lord Townsend looked every inch the merchant baron. He'd once been a handsome man, but now his paunch had spread from his stomach to his chin. The once lively eyes had become almost lost in layers of fat, and the thinning hair on his head showed several bald spots. His dissipation had finally caught up with him.

"Well, boy, it looks like I'll see you a man yet. Damn proud of you, I am, for defending your sister's honor against that wretch Devlyn."

Sophie ignored the blatant lie, as she unfurled her napkin and placed it in her lap. A platter of cold beef sat in front of her place setting, and she took a small helping before passing the platter to her father. He took the serving dish from her hands without a word of acknowledgement.

Across from her, Spencer frowned, and she gave him an imperceptible shake of her head. It was of little use trying to get Father to notice her. He'd never had time for her, and he had even less tolerance now for a spinster daughter. The only time she could expect his complete attention was when she was reviewing his ledger with him.

She ate her meal in silence, barely listening to the sound of her father's voice as he droned on about Devlyn's poor character. His hatred only seemed magnified, now that Devlyn was once more in residence at the keep. Heaven knew what he'd do if he discovered her plans to marry his enemy.

It had been a foolish thing to go see Devlyn this morning. She couldn't remember the last time she'd done something so imprudent or spontaneous. But he'd agreed to her proposition. She would be married and out of this godforsaken house in three days time. All in exchange for betraying her father. Was she really capable of doing this? It was so beastly. Could she really give Devlyn the information he needed to avenge himself? She had no choice now. She'd agreed.

"Damn it, woman, I asked you a question." Sophie jumped as her father's hand smacked the table and she jerked her gaze in his direction. "I asked you what took you so long this morning."

"So long?"

"You were gone riding for more than two hours."

"Oh ... I ... the morning was so beautiful, I lost track of time." She couldn't remember the last time her father had ever commented on the amount of time she spent riding. Dear God, was he watching her? Did he know where she'd been? The food she had just eaten threatened to rise in her throat.

"Well, I expected you to go over the accounts with me before lunch, now we'll have to do it before dinner. I have an appointment with the widow Waltham."

"Yes, Father." She ducked her head at the mention of Mrs. Waltham. The widow wasn't much older than she was. It pained her to think another woman almost the same age as her could have buried a husband and yet still receive suitors. Perhaps she should have accepted one of the offers of marriage she'd received her first Season.

But she hadn't. She'd been an ignorant fool hoping for a love match. Men didn't want love in their lives. It complicated things. She'd held out for a marriage of love, only to become a spinster in charge of her father's financial affairs.

The baron roughly shoved himself away from the table. "Damn it, Sophie. What's the matter with you today? I asked if you've finished tabulating those numbers off the Indian Princess' cargo."

She flinched. "I'm sorry, Father. Yes, they're completed. I'll show them to you later this afternoon."

The sight of his angry glare made her bite her lip nervously. He appeared ready to chastise her further, but instead he snorted with disgust and strode from the room. His departure made her release a breath of relief. Across from her, Spencer threw his napkin onto the table.

"The bastard," he cursed softly.

"It's all right, Spencer."

"No it's not, Phe. You don't deserve to be treated in such a way. You do everything he asks, and yet he doesn't even bother to acknowledge your presence."

"Father does as he sees fit. Neither one of us can change him."

"You're too kindhearted, Phe."

She stiffened at the statement. Her brother would soon be proven wrong. Giving Devlyn the means to destroy Father's financial affairs was far from a kindhearted act. But she was doing the right thing. She was restoring what had been stolen from Devlyn. It was the right thing to do, wasn't it? Confused, she rose from the table.

"Father's right, Phe. Something's wrong; you've hardly touched your meal."

Aware of her brother's ability to ferret information out of her, she forced a smile to her lips. "I'm fine. I'm just thinking about the Indian Princess. I can't believe I forgot to finish the figures."

"Finish the--but you told Father you'd finished them already."

She bit her lip. Blast! Oh what a tangled web she was weaving. She had finished the figures, and now she was lying to Spencer. Frowning, she shook her head.

"Did I, I suppose my dotage is showing." Spencer gave her an odd look, but didn't push the matter. Pasting another smile on her face, she circled the table and gave him a swift hug. "You worry too much,

although I adore you for it."

Before he could say another word, she brushed his cheek with her lips and scurried from the dining room. She really would have to take care with her words. It would be bad enough to arouse Father's suspicions, but Spencer was far more observant where she was concerned. Moving swiftly down the hall, she entered her father's study. For the past fifteen years she'd been keeping track of her father's accounts. When his accountant had died unexpectedly, she'd offered to tally his accounts until he found someone to replace the man.

She could still remember his raucous laughter when he'd heard her offer and scoffed at her ability. Determined to prove him wrong, she'd crept down to his study in the middle of the night and straightened out the accounts. The following morning, she'd wearily shown her father what she'd done. At first, he'd been furious, but after reviewing the books, he'd even seemed pleased.

It had been one of the rare times in her life, when she'd earned his approval. From that point forward, she'd worked as her father's accountant. In the beginning, she'd thought it might bring them closer, but if anything, it set her apart from him. She was his employee, not his daughter. The pain never seemed to go away, and when her mother died giving birth to Spencer, she was assigned to his care as well. She still missed her mother, but even her mother's love had not made up for the lack of her father's affection.

Seating herself at the desk her father had told her to use so many years ago, she pulled out one of the books she kept stored on top of the desk. Flipping open the book, she ran her finger down one column. Her finger stopped on one entry. There it was; the first of so many entries that would help Devlyn regain his fortune.

Her father had never tried to hide his illicit business dealings from her. Perhaps he'd just assumed she'd never consider doing what she was about to do. Refusing to dwell on the subject, she retrieved the second set of books she'd been keeping for almost the past year.

She didn't remember ever coming to a sudden decision to track her father's illegal activities; she'd simply started doing so. If he knew about the second set of books and her offer to Devlyn, disowning her would be the gentlest of punishments he'd impart on her. It didn't matter. She'd been banished a long time ago from this family. If not in body, at least in spirit. She was through hiding her father's duplicitous ways. For once, she intended to see justice served while freeing herself of his tyranny.

## Chapter 3

Devlyn stood on one edge of the glen, flanked by Caesar and Beast. The wolfhounds seemed to sense his irritation, and Beast used his large head to nudge at him. He absently patted the animal as his gaze scanned the tree line that separated his property from the Townsend land.

Since yesterday morning, a pair of hazel eyes and a heart-shaped face had persistently filled his thoughts. Sophie was by far the most intriguing woman he'd ever met. Soft one moment, feisty the next, she was an enigma, and he'd not been presented with a challenge like her in quite some time. He wasn't sure what to make of her. For all he knew she might have been sent by Lord Townsend in an attempt to wreak more havoc. It would be just like the bastard to use his daughter like that.

But he didn't think Townsend had sent her. Something about her convinced him she really was everything she said she was. It was refreshing actually. During his stay in New York, and in the few months he'd spent in London before returning to the keep, women had filled his nights. None of them, however, had fascinated him quite like Sophie did.

Their kiss yesterday had surprised him. It had made him want to carry her to his bed and keep her there until he spent himself of the desire she'd aroused him. His cock stirred to life in his trousers.

"God damn it. I had more control the first time I bedded a woman." Disgusted by his inability to control his body when it came to his thoughts about her, he frowned. He might have agreed to marry her, but that didn't mean he had to act like a hot-blooded youth anxious for his first lay.

He pulled his watch out of his pocket to check the time. Twelve-fifteen. She was late. No doubt, she'd had second thoughts and decided not to come. To hell with her. He turned around to survey the blanket and lunch he'd spread out on the glen's green carpet.

Once again played for a fool by a Townsend brat. He'd thought Sophie was different. What the hell did it matter? She was a spinster, hardly worth his time. Striding forward, he knelt to clear the lunch away. As he did so, he heard the sound of horse hooves cantering toward him. He turned his head, and a surge of relief lashed through him at the sight of Sophie riding in his direction.

He brushed aside the feeling. It was simply because he wanted to exact his revenge that he'd been worried. Nothing more. Standing up, he waited for her to come to a halt in front of him. She looked lovelier than yesterday with her flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes. His hand grasped the bridle of her mare, and he arched his eyebrow.

"Are you always so punctual, Miss Hamilton?"

The crimson in her cheeks darkened, but she held her head high. "I apologize, my lord. I had to take care leaving the house."

Irritation flashed in her eyes, and his mouth twisted with amusement. He'd not been mistaken. She might appear demure and reticent, but underneath that cool exterior was a fiery minx. Yes, he was going to enjoy taming Sophie Hamilton very much. He extended his free hand to her.

"Come, lunch is ready."

Although she hesitated, she released the reins and accepted his hand. With a lithe movement, she hopped off the horse to stand close to him. She radiated warmth, her sensuous curves making his fingers tingle with a need to explore every inch of her body. He knew immediately when she tensed. Already he was in the habit of noticing the way she bit her lip when she was nervous.

As he led her horse to a nearby shrub to tie the animal to a branch, he observed her bending over his dogs. She'd conquered them already. Beast was already on his back begging her to scratch his belly, while Caesar was trying to lick her face. Something about the scene pleased him.

"Beast. Caesar. Enough."

She smiled up at him. "They're quite playful. Which one is which?"

"Beast is the gray one, Caesar is the sandy-colored one."

She gave both animals one last caress then turned and followed him to the picnic blanket. She waited just on the edge of the spread, her fingers clenching the riding gloves she'd removed. Not waiting on her, he sank down onto his knees and sat back on his heels, watching her quietly. She frowned and sat down across from him on the checkered coverlet.

"Your manners are appalling, my lord."

"Are they? I hadn't noticed." He suppressed a grin at the way her mouth tightened with irritation. "Now then, what can I offer you? Cook prepared a cold chicken, a selection of cheeses, fresh vegetables, bread and apples for desert."

"Whatever you're having will be fine, my lord."

"What if said I intended to have you for lunch?"

She flushed, but didn't hesitate with her reply. "Then I fear you're apt to suffer from indigestion, my lord."

"Oh, I doubt that. In fact, I'm certain I'll find you a tasty morsel."

"I thought we were here to get to know each other. A speedy courtship as it were."

"You disapprove of my courtship? Would you prefer I anticipate the marriage bed?"

For a moment, she stared at him aghast. Then to his surprise, she laughed. It was a robust and musical sound, quite pleasant to his ears. She shook her head and smiled at him.

"You really are a rogue. I think you're deliberately trying to shock me."

"I simply speak my mind. The thought of bedding you is one I've contemplated quite a bit since our kiss yesterday."

Although he was preoccupied with preparing a plate for her, he heard the telltale hiss of her sucking in a sharp breath. He bit back a smile. It seemed their kiss had caused her some contemplation as well. Today, he had every intention of giving her even more to think about. He handed her a food-laden plate before stretching out his long legs to recline back on one elbow.

"Tell me, Sophie, what do you intend to do once we're married?"

He watched her forehead furrow slightly. "I haven't given it much thought actually. I suppose I'd like to go to London."

"And what would you do in that sprawling town?"

"Well, I enjoy the theater and the opera."

"Good God! Don't think I'll agree to escort you to the opera."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply I expected you to serve as my escort. I'm quite content to go on my own. In fact, I assumed we would lead separate lives for the most part."

His gaze met hers as he picked up a piece of cheese and slowly bit into it. She darted her gaze away and proceeded to eat her meal in silence. Curious, he watched her eat. The way her white teeth bit into a piece of cold chicken. The precise manner in which she broke her cheese in half before placing it between her full pink lips.

"So you thought we'd live apart. What if I prefer to keep my wife in bed?"

She arched her eyebrow at him. "I find it hard to believe you'll be that enamored with me, my lord."

"Enamored or not, you indicated you wanted my experience. Did you lie to me?"

"Of course not!" A blush crested her smooth cheeks. "I do want to know what it ... how to... Blast! You know what I'm trying to say. But, I don't expect it to last for very long at all."

"Interesting."

"What is?"

"Your logical, fatalistic approach to the subject of our matrimony. Your view of it is quite startling."

"I don't see what's so startling about it. After all, marriage mainly serves the purpose of allowing a man to line his pockets with money from the woman he marries and the pursuit of an heir. Nothing more, nothing less."

"And what of love, Sophie? Do you not long for love?" The words were out of his mouth before he realized what was happening. Bloody hell! What the devil had possessed him to ask her such a ridiculous question? Of course she longed for love. What woman didn't? But love wasn't something he was capable of giving her. To do so required him to trust, and that was something he would never do again.

Her eyes were wide as she looked at him. Frowning, he cursed himself again as she smiled with a touch of irony. "Love is for the young, my lord. Something I no longer am."

"You enjoy pointing out your age to me. I wonder why?"

"Not at all, I'm simply a realist. Love is for idealists, and I've learned practicality is a far better companion than wishful thinking."

"So what do you expect from our marriage, aside from living apart from your husband?"

"I'm not sure what you mean. If you're concerned that I'll make demands on your time, I can assure you I'm quite self-sufficient."

"Of that I have no doubt." He grinned. She was more than capable of taking care of herself or she wouldn't have possessed the ballocks to disturb the devil in his keep. "It's unheard of for a beautiful woman to accost me in the keep with the intention of marrying me."



A bright red spotted her cheeks at his words, and she glared at him. "It seems you enjoying making fun of me, my lord."

"Good God, I'm not making fun of you, woman, I'm simply teasing you."

"Oh." She worried her lower lip with her teeth. "I'm unaccustomed to such banter. The gentlemen I've known never did so with me."

"Ah, but I'm no gentleman, Sophie. In fact, I'm worse than any rake you might have heard of before."

She laughed again, and her face lit up with amusement. It made her lovelier still. Taking a sip of his burgundy wine, he wondered how the local male population had failed to see this woman for the beauty she was. Her laughter died away, although a smile remained on her lips.

"You shall have to work harder than that to appall me, my lord. I'm now convinced you say wicked things simply to shock me."

"Do you now? And what if I were to say something very wicked to you?"

"Whatever it is, I'm sure the initial embarrassment will dissipate quickly, leaving me better prepared for your next sinful expression."

Clutching his chest as though in great pain, he shook his head solemnly. "You wound me grievously, my dear. To think my wicked ways won't shock you is sad news indeed."

"I'm certain you shall recover quite nicely, my lord."

"Ah, but will you? After all, my sins are many, and I intend to teach them all to you."

Another blush crested her cheeks. "I can imagine you think me completely uneducated, but I do read, my lord. I shall not come to our marriage bed without some small idea of what happens between a man and woman."

The haughty reply took him aback for a moment. Why the little minx thought to set him down, did she? He arched his eyebrows at her, watching her pink tongue dart out to wet her full lips. "So tell me, Sophie. What do you expect will happen between us on our wedding night?"

"Well, I ... I ... we'll share a bed ... and I...." Her voice trailed off into silence.

"Ah, so the bravado you exhibit in your speech is far removed from your actual understanding."

"That's unfair. You can hardly expect me to describe such an intimacy."

"Why not? Shall I tell you what I know will happen?"

He watched her spine stiffen and straighten as she glared at him. "I doubt you would provide me with any information I'm not familiar with already."

"A challenge." His mouth twisted into a smile. "Very well. On our wedding night, I'll slowly remove your clothing, allowing myself to enjoy the firmness of those delightful breasts I've yet to see fully revealed."

Her gasp encouraged him to continue as his eyes met her shocked gaze. "Once you're naked before me, I intend to explore every inch of you with my mouth and tongue. Especially your nipples. I have a fascination with nipples. They're one of the few places on a woman's body that remain as hard as my cock during lovemaking."

This time her gasp was more of a choking noise as she stared at him in appalled fascination. He arched one eyebrow, daring her to protest. She glared at him but remained silent. Fully aware of his ungentlemanly behavior, he continued.

"I intend to suck on your nipples, Sophie, until that delightful spot between your legs is hot and wet. I'm going to use my mouth to make you writhe in my arms, begging me for a release you've not yet experienced."

"My lord, I--"

"Then when I'm quite certain you're ready for me, I'm going to plunge my cock deep inside you over and over again until I spill my seed in you. And all the while, I'm going to enjoy hearing you cry out from the pleasure of it all."

Silence fell between them, and he noted the rapid rise and fall of her breasts. Far better she know now than later the man she was marrying. There was still time for her to change her mind. Reluctantly, he had to admit that he didn't want her to change her mind, and her relatively calm composure pleased him.

Most women of her background would be running from him in hysterics, but not Sophie Hamilton. Either she was made of sturdier stuff or she was completely enthralled with his vivid description. And he found himself hoping it was the latter.

She took a deep breath as the tip of her tongue darted out to dampen her lips. What would those luscious lips feel like surrounding his cock? He was going to teach this fascinating creature to do things no wife would ever expect from her husband. The idea made him grin as he bit into a tart apple.

"You seem well pleased with yourself, my lord."

"I am."

"I suppose you find me amusing." Her cool tone almost completely hid the pain and anger lying beneath her words.

"You think I'm laughing at you."

"Aren't you? Isn't that what this is all about? A bit of sport with the old maid?" This time the bitterness was more evident. He leaned toward her and grasped the hand that was twisting her napkin with extreme violence. With a gentleness that surprised him, he carried her hand to his lips.

"Sophie, I was not having sport with you. I'm not a gentleman, far from it. But I can assure you, what I just described will be one of the most pleasurable experiences of your life."

He deliberately stroked her forefinger with his tongue, before pulling it into his mouth. As he sucked on her finger, he watched her shocked expression give way to reluctant pleasure. Releasing her finger, he turned her hand over to kiss her wrist. The tremor shooting through her reverberated against his fingers. Instinct told him it wasn't fear, but excitement.

"Tell me, Sophie, what do you think about when I touch you?"

"I ... I don't ... know. I suppose I like how nice it feels."

"Nice." He arched an eyebrow at her. He'd not heard a woman use the word nice where he was concerned in years. It didn't do much for his pride. "I believe I need to help you with your definitions regarding pleasurable sensations."

Not waiting for her to answer, he tugged her toward him so she lay prone across his lap. She stared up at him with a look of shock. Her mouth pouted in a slight "O" of surprise, and his cock stiffened at the sight. With a slow stroke, he ran his thumb along her bottom lip and it quivered beneath his touch. He refused to wait any longer to taste her.

Cradling her chin in his hand, he took her lips in a hard kiss. The scent of honey and lilac washed over him, teasing his senses. The women he'd made love to in the past had always worn exotic scents, but Sophie smelled of fresh wind and meadows. His tongue plunged into her mouth in an imitation of the carnal act he intended to avail himself of with her.

Unlike yesterday, this time she tentatively swirled her tongue around his. It made him rock hard. He pulled away and gently nibbled on her lower lip before his mouth drifted down across her jaw to the side of her neck. The soft moan that escaped her lips made him smile against her throat.

Not content with this simple surrender, he wanted more. He wanted her to beg for his touch and whimper when he denied her pleas. Then when he'd teased her some more, he would enjoy hearing her cry out with pleasure as he slowly introduced her to the ways of the flesh.

His hand slid up to her neck, where he deftly undid the buttons of her riding jacket. When she murmured a protest, he kissed her again. His fingers splayed her jacket apart, exposing the soft chemise beneath.

Unable to help herself, she parted her lips to give him access and she entwined her arms around his neck. A moment later, she was stretched out on the blanket with his long, hard length covering her. Her brain was fuzzy as to how she'd arrived in this position, but she didn't care. His touch thrilled her and she didn't want him to stop. The sudden touch of his fingers undoing the laces of her chemise made her inhale a sharp breath. He stopped and raised his head to look down at her.

"Tell me what you're thinking," he commanded in a rough voice. The sound thrilled her; she excited him. Sophie Hamilton, spinster, excited the Devil of Devlyn Keep.

"I ... I want more."

"More of what?"

"More of you kissing me ... tou-touching me."

"Then you shall have it."

His lips slanted over hers again in a deep, hot kiss. Sandalwood and spice mixed together to tantalize her nostrils, while she could taste the smooth burgundy he'd drunk with his cheese. It was a gloriously earthy sensation. She gasped against his mouth as his fingers slid beneath her chemise and across the top of her corset.

The ache in her breasts grew more tangible as her nipples hardened, straining against her underclothes. Oh God, she wanted him to touch her there. To somehow assuage the tension stirring inside her. Instinct made her force her breasts up higher in a silent plea for his touch. A moment later, his tongue slid between the valley of her breasts, and she uttered a soft cry of delight.

She craved the touch of his hand on her, everywhere, even in that most intimate place between her legs. Spiking her fingers through his hair, she shuddered beneath his caresses. Heat streamed its way through her limbs until fire encased her entire body. She'd never felt so deliciously wicked in her entire life.

Cool air caressed her skin, the fire doused almost immediately by his retreat. From where she laid on the blanket, she stared up at him in puzzlement. He appeared angry. Had she done something wrong?

"Not like this, Sophie. I won't take you here in the meadow for someone to stumble upon us. We'll wait until our wedding night."

She didn't know what to make of him. Mere seconds ago, he was caressing her body into a raging inferno, and now--now he was irritated and seemed unaffected by the kisses they'd exchanged. Well, perhaps that wasn't an accurate statement. His breathing was harsh, and there was a smoldering flame in those beautiful green eyes of his, while his tightened jaw tugged his scar into a taut line.

Offering his hand to her, he pulled her to her feet. Close to him once more, she trembled against his heat. The fire in his gaze flared bright in his eyes before he released her and quickly stepped away. Disappointment squeezed at her. Heaven help her, she liked being in his arms. It excited her. If this was what it would be like between them, caution was necessary. She refused to lose her heart again only to find herself supplanted by a younger woman.

With trembling fingers, she fastened her clothing. She cast him a furtive glance, noting how the white line of his scar contrasted with his dark skin tone. He was dangerously handsome, and just the type of man who could easily break her heart. There was something about him that told her an altogether different man hid behind his devil-may-care attitude. She watched as he folded his arms and studied her with a rigid jaw.

"I think a walk is in order. Shall we?" He abruptly offered his arm to her.

Bewildered by his brusque behavior, she accepted his arm and allowed him to guide her toward the path that trailed through the forest. She didn't know what to say, so she remained silent as they walked. They'd walked for several minutes when he came to a sharp halt.

"Sophie, I want you to carefully consider what you're doing. Tonight, I want you to think about what will happen if you marry me day after tomorrow."

"I'm aware of the consequences, my lord."

"Tell me what you think they are."

"My family will disown me." She averted her eyes from his steady gaze.

"And?"

"I don't understand."

"The guilt, Sophie. Can you live with that?"

She hesitated at the question. Could she live with the guilt? Did she really have a choice? Everything she knew about her father's dealings confirmed that Devlyn wasn't the only person her father had swindled.

"I can live with it," she said quietly.

"What else?"

"There is nothing else."

"What are the consequences of marrying the Devil of Devlyn's Keep?" The bleak look on his face made her want to ease the cynicism she saw in the depths of his green eyes.

"The only consequence I can foresee is that the Devil might have to answer to my brother."

"Are you referring to that young pup who assaulted me at the pond yesterday?" Just a glimmer of amusement brightened his eyes.

"He's not that much younger than you."

"Perhaps, but I'm more than capable of handling young Mr. Hamilton. What I was really referring to were the consequences of marrying a man who is a dissolute, unreformed rake."

He was warning her not to fall in love with him. Well, the man had nothing to fear from that quarter. Falling in love with a younger man wasn't part of her plan. She smiled. "I understand our bargain completely, my lord. You have something I want, and I have something you want. It's as simple as that."

"Then we understand each other. Come, you need to return home before someone questions where you've been." There was a disturbing gleam in his eyes, but it vanished before she could decipher the emotion.

Walking next to him, she wondered what it would be like to be the mistress of Devlyn Keep. She would at least have the opportunity to return to London. She'd always enjoyed the theater, but her father had refused to spend money on a daughter he said would never marry. Hopefully, Devlyn had enough funds to allow her some freedom. If not now, then when he recouped his monies from her father.

When they finally reached her horse, he helped her up into the saddle. His hand rested on her knee, the warmth of him sinking through the material of her dress to heat her skin. "I have business tomorrow midday. Meet me here at four, and I'd like to review the documents you have related to your father's business dealings."

"Oh, I forgot." She reached behind her and retrieved two ledgers from her saddlebag. "I meant to give these to you earlier. I thought you might want to see what you're paying for before you give your name away."

As he accepted her offering, a strange expression crossed his face. Biting her lip, Sophie studied him in silence. Something she couldn't account for had prompted her to bring him the ledgers. His long fingers ran over the green material before he accepted the books. He lifted her hand to his lips and brushed her fingertips with his warm mouth. Although he didn't say thank you, she read it in his manner. It was as if she'd given him a rare gift by trusting him.

"Until tomorrow then," he said.

With a smile, she wheeled her mare away from him then spurred the horse into a canter. As she rode away, Devlyn watched her, his fingers gripping the green books she'd given him. Beneath his fingertips was the weapon he needed to restore his honor and fortune. What had possessed her just to hand over this information before their wedding day?

Was she foolhardy or was this her way of saying she trusted him? Trust. Bitterness layered his soft laughter. Trust was for impetuous fools and starry-eyed maidens. God help him, but the last thing he needed was to have Sophie trusting him. She'd do far better thinking him the devil, rather than a man worthy of redemption. For something told him that's what she saw.

Perhaps the best thing to do would be to take the ledgers and forget he'd ever met her. No, that was impossible to do. Forgetting Sophie Hamilton wasn't something he wanted to do, even if he could.

## Chapter 4

Sophie breathed a sigh of relief as her father strode out of the study. For most of the afternoon, she'd been trying to explain to him the cargo manifests from the Cleopatra. Despite her best efforts, he'd been unwilling to accept the fact that one of his ships had taken a loss.

It reminded her of how he would react when Devlyn extracted his revenge. She was glad she wouldn't be here to see her father's rage. For it would be nothing less. Giving Devlyn the ledgers yesterday had been a

foolish risk, but she wanted to know that she could trust him. She needed to know his honor was stronger than his lust for revenge.

Tomorrow they would be married. There was an honorable man beneath Devlyn's devil-may-care attitude. She believed that with all her heart. The why or how of that belief was beyond her. Devlyn had already made it clear that he wasn't a man she should fall in love with. Did he think she held some idealized view of him and matrimony?

She supposed to some degree she did. Perhaps he had more insight to her than she had to herself. She'd always tried to be honest with herself, and now she had to face the reality of what she was about to do. Marrying a younger man was scandalous enough, but to consider the idea of a relationship with him was preposterous.

Her gaze shifted to the clock, and she muttered a soft oath. She'd been dawdling and she'd be late again meeting Devlyn. Yesterday he'd made it quite clear how important punctuality was to him. Clearing her desk, she quickly left the study and hurried toward the rear of the house. There was no time to change into her riding habit, so her work clothes would have to suffice.

As she crossed the stable yard, she looked up at the ominous sky. Should she risk being caught out in the rain? No, she had to know if Devlyn had kept his word to meet her. Inside the stable, she ordered her mare saddled, despite a protest from the groomsmen. Moments later, she rode off across the grassy plain at a fast gallop, her cape streaming out behind her.

She pushed her horse hard hoping to reach the woodcutter's cottage before the rain started. To her dismay, she was just at the edge of the forest when a heavy downpour unleashed its wrath over her head. By the time she reached the woe-begotten hut, she was soaked. Tumbling out of the saddle, she left her mare in the lean-to. The empty, makeshift stable made her heart sink. She'd been wrong. Devlyn hadn't come. He'd gotten what he wanted and left her to face her father's wrath. For once the financial upheaval started, her treachery and betrayal would be clearly evident.

Biting her lip, she stood in the cold, damp stall filled with uncertainty. A shiver went through her at the way her clothes were chilling her. She didn't want to contemplate the future at the moment. She simply wanted to be warm again.

Dashing through the steady rain, she hurried into the hut. Although the interior was relatively clean, it was dark and lonely. She quickly removed her clothing down to her damp chemise. Rubbing her hands up and down her arms, she tried to warm herself. She needed to start a fire.

The sight of a small stack of firewood and kindling next to the stone hearth made her sigh with relief. Now all she needed was a piece of flint. In the near darkness, she could barely make out the flint box resting on the mantle. About to reach for the starter, the hut door slammed open and she let out a scream of surprise as she wheeled around to face the newcomer.



"It's all right, Sophie. It's me."

Still shaken, she swallowed her fright as he closed the door behind him. Removing his overcoat, he shook it out then hung it on the rack beside the door. When he turned to face her, she could just make out the harsh lines of his face. He strode toward her and grasped her shivering shoulders.

"Why the devil didn't you stay at home? I would have thought you had more sense than to come out in this type of weather."

"It wasn't ... wasn't rain ... raining ... when I ... left home."

Her chattering response made him frown darkly. Whipping off his jacket, he covered her shoulders with it. The garment was relatively dry, and the warmth of it eased most of her discomfort immediately. She watched in silence as he busied himself getting a fire started.

One knee braced against the hearth, he arranged several pieces of wood in the fireplace. Her breath hitched at the way his linen shirt stretched taut against his back muscles. With each movement he made, his muscles rippled with a hypnotic power. The desire to run her hands over his back then slide her fingers through the wet layers of his dark hair was an ache inside her.

Her eyes drifted down to where his riding breeches hugged his firm buttocks. Fire burned her cheeks as she wondered what it would be like to see him naked. Would the muscles in his calves be as sinewy as they looked beneath his clothing? Her heart skipped a beat at the thought.

His shoulders flexed beneath his white shirt, as he stoked the smoking wood. He was the most virile man she'd ever seen. There was a suppressed strength about him that could be destructive or protective depending on his mood. The memory of his words yesterday returned, and she wondered if he would like her boldness if she touched him. What would he do?

Dear Lord, she was losing her mind. How could she be so attracted to a man so much younger than she was? Flames crackled in the hearth and the temperature in the hut slowly inched its way upward, but she wasn't sure whether it was her or the fire that was providing the warmth.

Apparently satisfied the fire wouldn't die out, Devlyn stood and turned to face her. The expression on his face was foreboding, and she narrowed her eyes at his fierce glare.

"You should have stayed home, Sophie. If I ever catch you doing anything so dull-witted again, I'll beat you within an inch of your life."

"Don't you dare threaten me, my lord. I'm not some doltish miss who doesn't know how to take care of herself."

"Is that so?" He growled as he slowly stepped toward her. "And what would you have done if some rake had come through that door?"

"You're the only rake in this county, and I'm certainly not afraid of you." She stepped back quickly as he drew near.

"Then I think it's time to show you exactly why you need to fear me."

Taking another step back, her leg encountered the edge of the cot that lined one wall of the hut. In her haste to avoid him, she tumbled backward and fell onto the narrow bed. Devlyn towered over her, the scar on his cheek highlighted by the bright flames crackling in the fireplace.

He pressed one knee onto the edge of the cot and braced his hands on either side of her shoulders. A strange fire glowed in his eyes as he stared down at her, and his clean, male scent washed over her. There was a dangerous edge to him she'd not seen before. It sent a shiver through her. To her surprise, it wasn't one of fear, but of excitement.

"Unlace your chemise." His lips tightened as she hesitated to obey the command. "Now, or I'll do it for you."

The roughness of his voice scraped her skin as her fingers fumbled with the laces holding the thin muslin together at the bodice. Her skin grew hot and she found herself dragging in short, rapid breaths as he watched her. Slowly she undid the laces, all too aware of his wicked eyes observing her every movement. His gaze moved to where she could feel her nipples rising to taut, hard peaks beneath the cotton undergarment. She flushed at the realization he could arouse her without even touching her. His mouth curled at one corner in the semblance of a smile.

"Open it up so I can see your breasts."

Her eyes widened at the command and she gave a slight shake of her head. She wasn't ready to expose herself so fully to him. She needed more time. His eyes narrowed at her hesitation.

"Afraid, Sophie?"

The mockery in his voice infuriated her but still she hesitated. An instant later, his large hand pulled the garment wide open in a sharp movement. She gasped as he did so, the cool air of the hut brushed over her skin. Her nipples hardened and the surrounding skin puckered up like goose flesh.

Devlyn sucked in his breath sharply, his green eyes darkening as he stared down at her. The desire in his face was raw and earthy. It made her heart race with a mixture of fear and excitement. He reached out one hand and cupped her, his thumb flicking over the stiff peak. She gasped at the sensation as her body

trembled beneath his touch.

Oh God, she was far too old to be acting like a wanton with him. Is this what it was like between a man and woman? This yearning, this ache? His thumb continued to circle her nipple, and her mouth went dry at the sinfully delicious pleasure of it. Her eyes fluttered closed.

Yesterday he'd told her he was going to suck on her nipples. Would he do it now? He switched hands to attend to her other breast. She arched her back, wanting him to do as he'd promised. She moaned. God, if only he'd take her into his mouth and suckle her nipple like he'd described.

"Tell me what you want."

Her eyes opened to meet his piercing gaze. Hot color burned her cheeks. He knew. But how could he? She gasped as he gently tweaked her nipple.

"Tell me."

"I want ... I want you to ... to do what you described ... at lunch yesterday."

"Yesterday? Did I happen to say something specific?"

"You know you did." She inhaled a quick breath as his thumb circled her nipple.

"You'll have to refresh my memory."

His fingers continued to fondle her, and she arched toward him. God help her, but he was going to make her beg him for it. She tried to control the fire spreading through her body, but all she could focus on was how much she wanted him to suck on her breast.

"I want you ... oh God, Devlyn ... please take me in your mouth."

"With pleasure," he murmured.

An instant later his tongue flicked across a rigid nipple before he clamped it between his lips and sucked on her. The gratification was sharp and instantaneous. Triumph surged through him at the way she arched upward into his mouth. He nipped at her stiff peak and she cried out at the keenness of the gentle bite.

God, she tasted wonderful, felt wonderful. How in the hell could she possibly be forty-one? Her body was as firm and ripe as a woman half her age. He needed to remember this was about justice--his name in exchange for the power to recover what had been stolen from him. But damn if she didn't make that difficult to do.

His hand slid over a supple, silky thigh. Bloody hell, he wanted to ram into her right now. Control, he needed to control the way she was affecting him, maintain his perspective. No, he needed to have her begging him. He wanted to hear her pleading with him to plunge into her.

He swallowed her sharp breath of surprise as he sought her lips. His tongue plunged into her mouth, mating with hers. She moaned softly and wrapped her arms around his neck, clinging to him as she matched the harsh intensity of his kiss. Sweet Jesus, she learned quickly. His blood surged throughout his body, and his cock tightened with the anticipation of assuaging its thirst for her hot, slick passage.

Breaking their kiss, he sought the side of her neck with his mouth. Beneath his lips, he tasted the fluttering beat of her racing pulse. He nibbled gently at her skin, then down to her shoulder. As he made his way down her arm, he brushed his thumb over the gooseflesh that encircled a hard pink pebble.

He continued to tease her nipple as he sat up and bent her leg. The cotton chemise fell down around her hips to reveal a rounded thigh and a triangle of hair that was already glistening with her hot cream. Her eyes flew open and she gasped at the way he'd exposed her. Slowly, he trailed his fingers down her leg while keeping his gaze locked with hers. Erratic breaths puffed past her lips, and his mouth tilted upward in a small smile.

"Tell me what else I should do to you."

"I ... I don't ... don't under ... stand."

Using his tongue, he traced a small circle at the crease where her leg was bent, while his finger stroked through the curls to caress the hidden nub at her core. The touch made her buck her hips.

"Tell me."

"Oh God, yes." She moaned and her eyes closed. "Yes, please, touch me there."

Her words ended in a soft whimper as he caressed her swollen sex. The point was to drive her beyond caring for anything else but him. He wanted to obliterate every thought from her head so the only images consuming her were of him and his touch. Christ, he wanted to drive her so mad with desire that she'd never want anyone but him.

As he played with her, her hips pressed up against his hand in a silent plea for more. Her hand slid down his arm to cover his as he increased the pace of his strokes to her core. She was slick with heat, and he inserted one finger up her snug passage. A moment later, she arched her back as she climaxed and her steamy cream covered his fingers.

"It's time for me to drink from you, Sophie."

"Drink ... I ... oh dear God." She jerked slightly at his words, her eyes opening to meet his. As he started to lower his head, her eyes widened in shock, and she tried to close herself to him.

With a growl, he parted her damp curls and swirled his tongue around her hot nub. Her scent was musky with a slight bite to it. He nipped at her sex gently, and a guttural cry broke past her lips. First, he suckled and then he caressed her with his tongue, all the while taking pleasure in her whimpering moans of pleasure. As she bucked against his mouth, he drank the sweet cream gushing from her as she climaxed once again.

Ah, she was a sweet find indeed. She would ride his cock better than any tight grip he might use. And when she came like this, she'd grip him and squeeze him until he exploded inside her. Rising up, he stared down at her. Her hand was curled up by her mouth, her little finger resting against the edge of her lips as if she were about to suck on it as he'd just been sucking on her. The sight tightened his ballocks, and he wanted to plunge into her now, brand her as his. Her pose was that of a willing supplicant at the altar of wickedness. It aroused him all the more. She was more than ready for him and he refused to wait.

His thumb rubbed over her nipple, and she whimpered at the sensitivity of the stiff peak. Dear God, what he'd done to her was indescribable. It was the most decadent, wicked thing she'd ever experienced. She could still feel the shudders rippling between her legs. His touch was like a drug and she wanted more. She wanted him to touch her again. To ... dear God she was wicked, but she wanted his mouth down there on her again.

Satiated and relaxed from the experience, she barely registered his movements. Suddenly the tip of him was nestled in her curls. Hot and hard, he slid partway into her tight core and she gasped at the sensation. His tongue swirled around her nipple as he pushed deeper into her slick passage.

Heat emanated from him, and she trembled as his mouth continued to tease her. Each time he slid out of her, he returned to probe deeper. Beyond all thought, she clung to him, her hands moving beneath his shirttails to skim over his sinewy chest.

Her hips arched off the bed as her body tried to keep him inside her. Desire blotted out everything except her need to have him fill her with his blazing heat. Her hips rose to meet his as he withdrew once more only to plunge deeper into her. She cried out at the slight pinch, and then he was filling her, expanding her with his heat.

The sensation was glorious, and she met his every thrust with equal zeal. Fire built between them as he slammed mercilessly into her, and she didn't care. It was the most freeing thing she'd ever done or experienced as he thrust so fiercely into her over and over again. The friction raged through her as he rode her with an intensity that sent her emotions shattering into oblivion.

With a wild cry, she arched up into him, her body shuddering as thousands of intense waves of pleasure rolled over her. A moment later, he too cried out and throbbed inside her with a pulsating strength that

triggered another round of pleasurable waves that crashed though her. As his climax finished, he lowered himself down on top of her. She accepted his weight with pleasure. Lying beneath him with her eyes closed, she sighed. If this were what she could expect on a regular basis, she would not mind being married at all.

The moment she sighed, he stiffened and his powerful forearms pushed him upward so he could stare down at her with blazing eyes.

"You see, Sophie, this is what a rake does. He takes an innocent simply for his own pleasure."

Stunned by the blunt statement, she could only stare up at him in horror. What was he saying? That he'd taken her simply to prove a point. Her mouth moved, but she heard nothing come out. With an abrupt movement, he retreated from her. Standing up, he adjusted his clothing and studied her with an unreadable expression on his face.

"Come, your dress should be dry by now."

As he turned away, she pushed herself up out of the bed. Ice flowed through her veins where only moments before fire had heated her limbs. "You bastard."

The quiet words were all the more strident in the small hut. She saw his back stiffen and he jerked his head around to glare at her over his shoulder. A derisive smile curled his mouth. "Rakes usually are, my dear. But you were the one to approach the devil in his keep. It's not as if I lured you here."

Sophie ignored the truth of his words and quickly tied the laces of her chemise. She wanted to clean the sticky area between her legs, wash away the evidence of his possession. But would she be able to wash away the way her body still cried out for his touch? She was a fool.

Fury warmed her as she wrapped her stays around her body and started to lace them. When he stepped forward to help her, she jerked away from him. As she finished her task, she glared at him.

"You're correct about one thing, my lord. I might have made a deal with the devil, but I don't have to keep it."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"You have the ledgers. Do with them as you will. But I'll not marry you."

"Don't be a fool. We both know your father will know you're the one who betrayed him. If there's one thing I know about Townsend, he has a filthy temper."

She knew he was right, but at the moment, she didn't care. All she wanted was to run as far away from him as she possibly could.

"I'll deal with my father when the time comes, but as for you--"

At that moment, the hut door flew open and she stared in horror at the sight of her brother standing in the doorway shaking off the rain from his clothes.

"Phe, what the devil were you thinking coming out in this downpour ... bloody Christ!"

In a long, drawn out moment, all of them stared at one another in varying states of horror, anger, trepidation and calm indifference. With a low cry of fury, Spencer stepped toward Devlyn. Without thinking, Sophie leaped forward to put herself between them, but Devlyn shoved her behind him.

"I'll kill you for this, Devlyn. You weren't satisfied with ruining Eleanor, now you have to prey on Sophie."

"Eleanor was beyond ruin when I met her, Hamilton. And if you must know, Sophie came to me."

Spencer drew up short and Sophie met the stunned expression of her brother over Devlyn's shoulder. Anger mixed with disbelief as he stared at her. "You're a liar, Devlyn. Sophie would never come to the man who ruined her sister."

The conviction in Spencer's voice snapped the tenuous thread in Sophie that connected her with the father and sister who had betrayed her so cruelly. Furious, she shook her head and tried to step around Devlyn. An oath escaped his lips as he blocked her path.

"Damn it, Sophie, you're not dressed decently."

"A bit late for proper behavior now, don't you think, Devlyn?" her brother sneered.

"Stop it, Spencer. Devlyn's done nothing wrong. I came here of my own free will."

"He's making you say that somehow." Hate filled Spencer's eyes as he glared at the man standing guard over her.

"No, Spencer." She shook her head again. "We've only anticipated our wedding night by a few short hours. We're to marry tomorrow."

"Good God! Have you lost your mind, Phe! This man isn't just a rake, he ruined our sister."

"No!" Sophie shouted the word with all the fury inside her. "Don't you ever say that again. Eleanor was whoring with one of the stable boys when she got pregnant and tried to convince Devlyn it was his child."

Spencer snorted loudly. "I suppose he told you that."

"No, I stumbled across Eleanor and her lover one morning before I went riding. She laughingly stated that she was going to marry Devlyn simply to give her child a name."

"But, Eleanor told me--"

"Eleanor lied to you. You weren't here, and I could hardly write about something like this. When Devlyn refused to marry Eleanor, Father went into a wild rage and swore to destroy him. When they couldn't find a way to force him to marry Eleanor, they convinced Andrew to marry her. Then Father stole nearly everything Devlyn had."

Spencer looked bewildered and she recognized the pain of betrayal in his features. She wanted to go to him, but Devlyn's strong hands reached behind him and held her in place as if reading her thoughts.

"Hamilton, I suggest you step outside for a moment. Sophie needs to dress."

Dazed, her brother nodded and left the hut. As the door closed behind him, Devlyn turned to face her. His jaw was tight, emphasizing the jagged line across his cheek. She took a step back from him at the dark look on his face.

"So you changed your mind," he said softly. "A wise decision."

"The only reason I did so was to save Spencer."

"Another wise choice."

"Yes, it was. Otherwise he would have killed you." She spat out the furious words. "And as appealing as that thought is, I have no intention of seeing my brother imprisoned, or worse, simply for the demise of a despicable rogue."

His face was cold and unreadable as he studied her. "It seems you finally understand my true nature. Don't forget it."

Without giving her a chance throw another insult out, he stormed out of the hut.



## Chapter 5

Devlyn glared at Spencer Hamilton as he slammed the cottage door closed behind him and stood on what could barely pass for a porch. He dared the impudent pup to even open his mouth. But the boy simply turned away from him to stare out at the fine drizzle that had replaced the earlier downpour.

"Do you love her?"

The quiet question made him start as he glanced in Hamilton's direction. The young man didn't turn his head. Something told him the boy would only appreciate honesty, just as Sophie would. He ignored the twinge of guilt at how bluntly honest he'd been with her.

"We have ... an agreement."

"Then you don't love her." Hamilton's voice had a hard edge as he turned to face him.

"I'll never lay a hand on her in violence and when my investments mature, I'll see to it that she wants for nothing."

"You're too young for her."

"Age is a state of mind. Your sister is in many ways younger than I am."

"Not from what I just witnessed," the young man replied grimly.

Devlyn shrugged and looked out at the wet landscape. What the hell was the matter with him? Why did he feel like the villain? Sophie had sought him out, not the other way around.

"If you hurt her, I'll make you pay dearly, Devlyn."

At the love and loyalty in the boy's voice, he turned his head to look at Sophie's brother. There was a

calm determination in Hamilton's face, and he was quite certain the boy would indeed avenge any slight to his sister. He nodded.

"Understood."

The door behind them opened, and Sophie joined them under the rickety overhang. She scarcely afforded him a look before she touched her brother's arm.

"Spencer?"

For a moment, he wasn't sure the boy was going to answer her, and he tensed ready to call the lad to heel. As the young man turned, his eyes gave Devlyn a silent warning. He returned the look steadily. He might be a despicable rogue, but he still possessed the honor of his word.

"I don't suppose you've told Father of your plans."

The quiet statement made Sophie start, and Devlyn watched her bite her lip out of nervous habit. What was going through that complex brain of hers? She heaved a sigh and shook her head.

"You know what would happen if I did, Spencer."

When Hamilton didn't answer her, she turned away from her brother to face him. Her hazel eyes were still slightly glazed with pain at his verbal abuse, and a silent oath sliced through his head. Damnation. He should have taken more care with her. No. If she harbored illusions about him, better to destroy them now before the worst happened. He bit the inside of his cheek.

"I've arranged for the vicar to perform the wedding ceremony at eleven tomorrow morning."

"I'll be punctual, my lord."

She turned away, adjusted the hood of her cloak, and stepped out into the rain in the direction of the lean-to where the horses were. Hamilton made to follow her then stopped.

"I'd like to stand with Sophie tomorrow if you have no objection."

"None whatsoever."

"Tomorrow then." Hamilton nodded at him before following his sister out into the rain.

He didn't move from where he stood, simply watching as Sophie and her brother retrieved their mounts and rode off toward Townsend Manor. The fact that she didn't even cast him another glance irritated him.

What the devil had the woman expected? She'd been aware of his reputation. But she expected better of you, Devlyn. The internal reproof infuriated him.

"God damn it!"

He threw the hut door open and reentered the small dwelling. As he yanked his overcoat off the wall hook, his gaze came to rest on the narrow cot. His body tensed as the memory of making love to Sophie his flooded his head. The sound of her excited cries still echoed in his ears, and he could still smell her tangy aroma. The memories were enough to tighten his mouth in a straight line. Beginning tomorrow, he'd take her over and over again until he wearied of her. Then he'd have her out of his head for good.

\* \* \* \*

Sophie shook the rain off her cloak as she stood in the back hallway. Beside her, Spencer's face wore a frown. She glanced over her shoulder to ensure no one was within earshot before she turned to him.

"You didn't say a word on the way home."

"What was I supposed to say, Phe?"

"That you understand."

"What am I supposed to understand? That you're about to marry a man you don't know? A man who's almost young enough to be your son?" The harsh disgust in his voice stung, and she stiffened.

"And yet it's quite appropriate for Father to be courting a woman younger than his eldest daughter."

He started and had the grace to blush with embarrassment. "Damn it, Phe, you know what I mean."

"No, Spencer, I don't. You seem to think I have no need for companionship or a home of my own. The only reason Father doesn't try to marry me off to one of his friends is because I'm useful to him. The man doesn't even love me, his own daughter."

She inhaled a deep breath as she spit out the words. Not about to explain herself any further, she stalked off to her room. Spencer's anger wasn't a surprise, but she'd expected him to be supportive once she explained about Eleanor. Instead, he'd only pointed out the age difference between her and Devlyn.

Inside her room, she went to her washstand and poured a substantial amount of water into the basin. Lifting her skirts, she tried to erase all trace of Devlyn's mark from her body. When she finished, she sank down at her dressing table to stare at her reflection. She didn't look any different, but she felt different.

She bore Devlyn's brand, and no amount of water could wash away the sensation. Burying her face in her hands, she shuddered as she remembered how he'd taken her, then just as easily pointed out how it meant nothing. He'd warned her, and she'd failed to listen. The man she was about to marry was a confirmed rake. A man who thought only of his own pleasure first. No. That at least she knew wasn't true.

Once again, she studied her reflection. Her gaze fell to her bodice as she remembered the way he'd commanded her to reveal her body to him. He'd been masterful and arrogant with her today, but he'd made certain to pleasure her to the fullest extent possible.

Only when she'd surrendered and begged for his skillful touch had he sought his own pleasure. And God help her, she wanted to experience his lovemaking again. The decadent, sinful nature of it was thrilling. The muscles between her legs tightened as she remembered the way his tongue had probed and teased her until her insides exploded with a fiery heat.

She closed her eyes against the figure watching her from the mirror. Was this what she had become? An old maid craving the touch of a younger man like a bitch in heat. She couldn't do it. She couldn't go through with the marriage. Springing to her feet, she prowled the floor.

How could she marry him? How could she bear his pity and his granting her his touch when the mood suited him? But did she have a choice? Staying here was no longer an option. Her father's tyranny was too oppressive and when he discovered her treachery, her life would be worth nothing.

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts and she crossed the room. Opening the door, she frowned at Spencer's contrite expression.

"I'm sorry, Phe. I should have understood."

"Yes, you should have. You of all people know what it's like to live here, but at least you get to leave."

"I know. That's what I realized a few moments ago."

She heaved a sigh. "Then you'll help me tomorrow."

"Of course. What are little brothers for?" The beguiling grin on his face made her own face tug in response. A reluctant smile tilted her lips.

"I don't know why I put up with you."

"Because you love me, Phe. Admit it. I'm your best brother."

"You're my only brother."

"A minor point to be sure. Come, it's time for dinner. Your last as an unmarried woman."

The jocular comment startled her and she closed her bedroom door to walk with him down the hallway. He was right. It was her last night as Sophie Hamilton. Tomorrow, she would become Sophie Hamilton Blackwell, Countess of Devlyn. A title Eleanor had coveted. She was about to have something her sister never could. The thought should have pleased her greatly, but all she could think about was Devlyn's words. "You see, Sophie, this is what a rake does. He takes an innocent simply for his own pleasure."

\* \* \* \*

Devlyn stood quietly in the nave of the church, his hands clasped behind his back. The vicar remained quiet as well. He liked that about the man. Although he'd never been particularly fond of religion, he did understand the need of his tenants to have a place to come to on Sunday mornings. This new vicar seemed a decent sort, but more importantly, the man didn't fawn all over him or pontificate.

The wooden door of the church screeched open and his gaze flew to where a ray of light streamed down the church aisle before Sophie's shapely curves blocked it. Tension eased from his body, and he frowned. Why the devil had he been so uneasy about her coming? He didn't want to know the answer.

She wore a dove gray walking dress, and he was again struck by how young she looked. Young and quite lovely. Out of habit, he pulled out his pocket watch and glanced at the time as Sophie reached his side.

"I am quite punctual, my lord."

Her soft voice held a note of steel in it, and he clicked his timepiece closed. His eyes met hers, and he tightened his mouth at the reserved expression on her face. Spencer Townsend stood a short distance away, looking ill at ease. He didn't blame the boy; he was experiencing a similar sense of disquiet himself.

Extending his hand to Sophie, he watched her hesitate for a split second before the soft grey leather of her gloves warmed his palm. She was trembling in spite of her serene appearance. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze as he looked at the vicar.

"I believe we're ready to proceed, Reverend."

With a nod of his head, the vicar began to recite the marriage ceremony. Half listening to the words, Devlyn breathed in a quiet floral scent. Her scent. She was different today. Had his actions yesterday brought that about? There was a steely, determined air to her. It intrigued him. No, challenged him. Damn if the woman wasn't an enigma begging to be unraveled.

The vicar said his name pulling him back to the matter at hand.

"Do you Quentin Thornton Blackwell, earl of Devlyn, take Sophie Faith Townsend to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

"I will."

Sophie's hand trembled in his. Without thinking, he covered it with his other hand and she looked at him. He stared into her eyes as the vicar posed the marriage question to her. For a moment, he thought she might flee. Instinctively he tightened his hold on her not about to let her escape, but she simply dropped her gaze and responded firmly to the query.

The remainder of the ceremony passed swiftly. As the vicar pronounced them man and wife, satisfaction warmed him as he kissed her. The sensation startled him. He should be feeling resignation, not this triumph at making Sophie his bride. He took a quick step back from her and turned as Spencer Hamilton stepped forward to congratulate them.

"My congratulations," Sophie's brother said quietly.

There was a wary look in the man's face as he offered his hand to Devlyn. He understood it. Hamilton wasn't sure whether he was trustworthy or not, but the man also knew there was little he could do about his concerns.

"I'll keep her safe." Devlyn grasped Hamilton's hand in a strong, firm handshake. "And you'll always be welcome in our home."

The suspicion in the young man's face eased somewhat as he nodded his head and clasped his other hand over Devlyn's. Watching the two men exchange a firm handshake, Sophie trembled. She'd done it. She'd actually married the Devil of Devlyn's Keep. The rake who'd had his pleasure with her only yesterday. Today he seemed oddly gentle with her.

When he'd covered her hand with his during the ceremony, she'd been startled and confused by the gesture. Was he having regrets about his behavior? It didn't matter. She had no intention of succumbing to his wicked charms again. They'd had their wedding night. It didn't warrant repeating. He could find a

mistress and leave her be for all she cared.

It was a lie. She did care. Whatever had made her imagine Devlyn might possibly be a man capable of reform? Yesterday had proven how incapable he was of changing. She flinched as his hand settled at the small of her back. Fire swept up her spine at the touch. Now the only family she'd ever truly known was about to leave her. Spencer took her hands in his and kissed her cheek.

"I'll call on you in a few days."

"Promise me you'll not tell Father you knew about this. I have no wish for him to punish you."

"I can take care of myself, Phe. Just be happy, something I know you weren't at home."

"Blast it, Spencer. Promise me." She gripped his hands tightly and glared at him.

"All right, I promise. Now for the love of Pete, will you stop trying to break my hands?"

Sophie immediately released her grip on her brother. With another bow toward Devlyn, Spencer turned and walked out of the church. As he walked away, she sensed her old life leaving with him. A light touch at her elbow caught her attention. Turning her head, her gaze met her husband's unreadable one.

"Come, we need to sign the registry and the license."

Nodding, she allowed him to guide her into the recesses of the church to sign the formal paperwork. When they finished, Devlyn escorted her out to a small curricule drawn by two chestnut horses. He helped her into the vehicle, then circled round to the opposite side and climbed in beside her.

As he slapped the hindquarters of the animals, he sent her a brief glance. "I take it from the exchange with your brother that you didn't tell your father about our matrimonial plans."

"No. I thought it best to simply leave. I sent my things to the keep with a trusted servant, who I asked to come with me."

"And what will your father do when you turn up missing?"

"I left him a letter in my room."

He nodded his understanding as he drove the team around a sharp turn in the road. Ahead of them, Devlyn Keep rose up to greet them. Dark and forbidding, the massive stone structure had once served as a mighty fortress against marauding knights. She bit her lip at the realization that she was now mistress of this gloomy home.

The long drive leading up to the keep was lined with a smattering of oak trees, their leaves just beginning to change color. It was a reminder that fall would soon be here. As they pulled up to the front of the grim-looking dwelling, the front door opened and three servants emerged to greet them. When she was standing on the ground, Devlyn drew her forward toward the small group.

"This is your new mistress, the Countess of Devlyn." He gestured toward an older man. "This is Fischer. He's been with me since before my father died. He runs the household, but I'm certain he'll appreciate your guidance."

She nodded as the wiry man bowed toward her. An older woman stepped forward whom Devlyn introduced as Cook, followed by a young girl of about thirteen who was the housemaid. A very small staff for such a large house. Her face must have revealed her dismay because Devlyn frowned darkly. His large hand clenched around her elbow and he pulled her into the house toward his study.

"It's a small household, my lady, since I've not had the resources to expand. My staff members are loyal, hardworking people. I'll not tolerate any contempt directed toward them."

His abrasive tone scraped down her spine as he roughly guided her into his study. Narrowing her eyes at him, she glared at him. "Do not mistake me for my father or sister, my lord. I might not have your noble lineage, but I am far removed from any semblance of a boorish social clod."

As they entered the masculine domain, the two giant wolfhounds sprang to their feet. With a single flick of his wrist, the animals immediately sank back down onto their rug. Devlyn turned his head and studied her for a long moment before he gave her a sharp nod. Wheeling away from her, he moved to stand behind his desk. From where she stood, she could see the green ledgers she'd given him two days ago. His manner abrupt, he flipped open one of the books.

"It says here your father owns two warehouses on Liliput Road near the Royal Victoria docks. What does he normally store there?"

"Whatever his ships bring into port."

"Does he own the warehouses free and clear?"

"No, a Mr. Mearn shares ownership in the building. What are you thinking?"

"That your father is about to lose an accommodating partner. I have several shipments coming into port in three weeks, and I've been looking for some storage space. This will give me the space I need, plus force your father to recompense me for space at a higher rate."

"How can you make him pay a higher rate if he already has ownership in the building?"



"Unlike Mr. Mearn, I don't intend to move my cargo to make space for your father's goods. He can pay me a much higher premium for me to move my goods, or he can go elsewhere. Either way he'll suffer a loss, whether from selling his cargo for a lower price just to get rid of it or by paying me a higher price simply for the privilege of storing it."

The simplicity of the plan made her appreciate his keen business acumen, and something told her it would not be long before Devlyn had her father on the brink of financial ruin. The thought of such a thing tugged at her. Guilt. He'd warned her about this, and she'd assured him she could handle it.

She reminded herself that her father's business dealings were far from legal in many cases. He would reap what he'd sown. At least she was beyond his reach. Still, the pain of his rejection would always be with her. Witnessing his downfall would not diminish those feelings. "If you think to stop me, Sophie, be warned I'm an unforgiving man." His flat voice made her start as her eyes searched his implacable features.

"I'm well acquainted with your less than charitable qualities, my lord."

"As long as we understand one another." His gaze narrowed on her.

"We do."

He studied her for a moment until he slowly rounded the desk. She swallowed hard as he stopped in front of her, the distance between them less than a foot. God, how could she have such mixed feelings despite their encounter yesterday? Part of her wanted nothing more than to rail at him, condemn him for his behavior yesterday. While the other half of her wanted to fling herself into his arms and beg him to touch her again. She was older than he was. She should be able to control this infatuation that was growing inside her.

An arrogant smile tilted the corner of his mouth, and her heart pounded against her breast at the close proximity of him. The tantalizing scent of sandalwood caressed her senses, and she struggled not to retreat. He'd only see that as a sign of weakness. The heat of his fingers singed her cheek, and a familiar sensation spiraled through her belly. She didn't want to feel this way with him. Taking a quick step back, she frowned while attempting to control her erratic breathing.

"My lord, if you'll excuse me, this morning's events have been quite trying and I'd like to rest."

"Shall I show you to your room?" A frown replaced his smile, and his eyes darkened with something resembling concern. She dismissed the notion as she shook her head.

"That won't be necessary, I'm certain Fischer or the housemaid will be able to help me find my way."

He nodded his head, and she fled the room with as much undue haste as possible.

## Chapter 6

Sophie awoke with a jerk. Sitting up in bed, she looked around at the room Fischer had shown her to when she'd fled Devlyn's study. The bedroom had once been quite lovely, but now the curtains, bedspread and carpets were all well past their prime. Her mouth twisted in an ironic grimace. Not unlike herself, she supposed.

Despite its aged appearance, there was a quaint charm about the room. It was clean and welcoming, even down to the fresh flowers in the vase beside her bed. Through the windows, she could tell the sun was setting, so she knew she'd slept most of the afternoon.

She'd not slept well last night, and her nap had been a welcome relief from the morning's stress. Sliding off the bed, she moved to the dressing table. Wincing at the bedraggled creature staring at her from the mirror, she undid her hair and set about repairing her appearance.

As she brushed her hair, she wondered if her father had found her letter yet. The only thing she expected from him was anger, but a small part of her still hoped he might harbor some feelings for her. Earlier when Devlyn had described his first plan of attack against her father's finances, her feelings of guilt had surprised her. She'd not expected to feel anything but bitterness and a desire for revenge.

Even more unexpected was her reaction to Devlyn. She still wanted him, in spite of his behavior yesterday. She should be ashamed of herself for craving his touch. He was a rake, full of wickedness and sin. It intensified his appeal. Of course, he was far too young for her. But he made her feel alive, sensuous and coveted. The one thing he'd not done was hide his desire. He'd made it blatantly clear that he meant to have her time and again.

She shuddered as she stared at her reflection in the mirror. No matter how much she might be attracted to Devlyn she couldn't allow herself to succumb to his touch again. It was too dangerous. The need for love in her life left her vulnerable. Eventually, it would be far too easy to mistake his lust for love if she continued to give herself to him. She refused to let that happen. Surrendering her soul to him only meant

she'd have to pick up the pieces of her heart in the future. No. Yesterday would be her only taste of pleasure in Devlyn's arms. She couldn't risk her heart with another encounter.

\* \* \* \*

Devlyn frowned as his latest attempt to draw Sophie into a conversation failed. What the devil was wrong with her? He wanted tonight to be special for her. Yesterday had been a mistake where she was concerned. He'd allowed his emotions to control him, and when he'd regained control, Sophie had paid the price. But tonight he'd make up for his lack of control.

He studied her as she used her fork to push her meal around on her plate. Of course, she didn't seem in the mood to make things easy for him. Frowning again, he took a sip of his wine. As he did so, she suddenly laid her fork down with a deliberate movement and dropped her napkin onto the table.

"If you'll excuse me, my lord. I think I'll retire. It's been a long day."

Long day? Hell, she'd spent the entire afternoon in her bedroom. Well, at least she'd be well rested for their wedding night. He nodded and set his own napkin aside as she rose from her chair.

"As you wish, I'll join you later." His words made her freeze, and she sent him an icy look.

"We've had our wedding night, my lord. There'll not be another." She didn't wait for a response but walked stiffly toward the dining room door.

For a fleeting moment, he was speechless. Then anger took over. It had been a long time since a woman had cut him dead in his tracks. He'd be damned if he was going to let his wife get away with doing so. Shoving back his chair, he crossed the dining room floor in three strides catching up with her as she reached the door.

Blocking her way, he glared into her stormy eyes. Anger had turned them the loveliest shade of green. The moment he acknowledged the fact, he immediately pushed it aside. The last thing he needed was to be distracted from his purpose. With a quick twist of the key, he locked the door then tucked the key in his pocket. They were going to have this out before they retired to his bedchamber.

"There are a few things we need to clarify between us."

"And these things, my lord, are they rules or commands?" Her voice made each word sound like the bite

of a crisp apple.

"You may label them whatever you choose as long as you heed them."

"Then please proceed, I'm all atwitter at your every word."

He gritted his teeth as her sarcasm fueled his anger even more. The wench was acting like a fishwife.

"First, I enjoy pleasant conversation during dinner. I'll not tolerate apathetic or morose behavior at my table."

"I see. Exactly what do you term apathetic or morose?"

Narrowing his eyes at her, he ignored her question and stepped toward her. She retreated in equal measure. "Second, while this is your home too, I, and I alone, rule here."

"Well, I find your sovereignty sadly lacking in more ways than one, but after all, you're a rake. Why should I be surprised?"

"So that's what this is all about."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're still angry about yesterday."

"Why on earth shouldn't I be angry? You had your way with me simply to prove a point." She glared at him, her eyes a mossy green. Damn if she wasn't fetching in her anger.

"And do you know what the point was, Sophie?"

"To show me exactly what type of fool I am for having entered into a bargain with you."

"You missed the point of the entire exercise."

"Exercise!" She threw herself at him, her hand swiping at his face. "You're a bastard, Devlyn."

Catching her easily, he pinned her arms gently, but firmly behind her back and pulled her close. "Why? Because I gave you exactly what you wanted?"

"That's a lie."

"You think so? You're forgetting how you begged me to suck on you." A flush crept into her cheeks, but she refused to respond. He couldn't resist grazing her heated skin with his lips.

He shouldn't be surprised that her anger hadn't abated. So why had she married him? For that matter, why the hell had he married her? The answer to that question whispered through his head, and he ignored it.

"You've had your fun, now let me go."

There was a pained tightness to her voice and a thread of guilt tried to wind its way around his heart. He tore it to pieces. His gaze raked her face, and he noted the stubborn tilt of her chin with irritation. She was the one who'd wanted to experience what men and women did in the bedroom. And he knew damn well she'd enjoyed herself yesterday. Hell, she'd been more than eager for him to do whatever he wanted with her. And damn if he didn't want to experience her again.

"I'll let you go on one condition."

Her eyes narrowed like a suspicious cat as she met his gaze. "What condition?"

"You're to kiss me." One hand still binding her wrists together, he rested one finger on her lips as she sputtered with anger. "And not a simple brushing of the lips, Sophie. I want you to make me hot."

"Go to hell."

"Kiss me."

He watched the indecisiveness cross her heart-shaped face. Her tongue flicked out to wet her lips, and his cock tightened in his trousers. Before the night was through, he intended to prove to her how much she wanted him. Then he'd be able to purge himself of this desire that had been steadily building inside him since the first time he'd laid eyes on her.

Slowly she leaned into him, her mouth inching closer until she slanted her lips over his. The scent of lilacs wafted under his nose as she pressed her mouth firmly against his. Elated at having bent her to his will, he knew it was only a matter of time before she came to understand he was in charge at Devlyn Keep.

The sudden sensation of her tongue lacing over his lips shot a bolt of surprise through him. Good God, the woman was a temptress. He opened his mouth to welcome her exploration, and she swirled her tongue around his as she deepened their kiss. She tasted as tart as the baked apples they'd had for dinner.

His hands released her arms and slid to her waist to meld her to him as closely as he could. Her arms slowly wrapped around his neck, and their mouths continued to collide in a kiss that stirred his cock to a stiff point. A moment later, she shoved her way out of his arms.

"Are you hot enough now, my lord? After all, teasing is what a rake's wife does best."

Stunned he stared at her for a brief second, then grabbed her arms and pulled her against him. "Then tease me some more, madam wife, for I am not about to let you go until my need is satisfied."

"How typical of a rake, always taking."

"Oh no, Sophie, not tonight. Tonight you'll beg me just like you did yesterday. The only difference will be that I intend to make you beg throughout the night."

"You may try, my lord."

"Shall we wager how long before your first plea?"

He didn't wait for her answer and simply crushed her mouth beneath his in a harsh kiss. No, he was losing control. He needed to seduce her, not force her. But it had to be soon. It wasn't just his cock throbbing with desire. His entire body lusted after her with an ache beyond anything else he'd ever experienced before.

Easing the pressure of the kiss, he trailed his fingers along her neck in a featherlight caress. While he stoked her skin, his lips made their way along her jaw toward her earlobe. As he nibbled at her neck, he ran his forefinger along the bodice of her gown.

She quivered at the touch, despite her resolve to remain unmoved. Dear God, why did she respond to him so easily? He was right, and she knew it. She did want him, even if he was a rake. That was the agony of it. Despite knowing who and what he was, she wanted him, foibles and all. His finger slid under the edge of her bodice, probing until the tip of his finger brushed against her nipple. Before she could stop herself, a small gasp broke from her lips.

Swallowing the sound with his mouth, his tongue mated with hers in a heady dance. The excitement of it made her cling to him as she'd done before, her response willing and passionate. Heat engulfed her body, and her fingers sought the buttons of his shirt. She wanted to feel his hard skin beneath her fingertips again. Of all the men she'd known, why was he the only one who'd ever made her feel this raw need? His kiss tugged another moan from her as she answered his demanding caress with her own summons.

As the linen shirt gave way beneath her fingers, she slid her hands across his hard, muscular chest. Heat filled her palms as her hands skimmed over sinewy muscles. The warmth of him sent her blood singing exultantly through her veins as her tongue danced with great fervor in his mouth. Her thumbs circled his nipples, and when his muscles flexed at her touch, she knew he enjoyed the caress.

What would happen if she were to suckle him as he'd done her? She pulled her mouth away from his and

left a trail of kisses to the side of his neck. Doing as he'd done, she nipped at his skin, pleased by his ragged breathing. Her mouth slid down across his chest until she found one nipple. She flicked out her tongue and circled the peak then clamped her teeth down gently and sucked. The low growl of pleasure echoing over her head told her how much she was pleasing him. He wanted her. The Devil of Devlyn's Keep desired her. It was a heady sensation.

"Sweet Jesus, but you're a wanton, Countess."

An instant later, he lifted her off her feet, carried her the short distance to the table and set her on top of it. His mouth covered hers again with heated urgency. She returned the kiss with a frantic need of her own. There was no time to think as his hands raced across her clothing until her bodice and stays fell away from her breasts. She struggled to remove her chemise until his warm hands gave it a sharp tug, renting the fabric and exposing her to his mouth.

The pleasure of his tongue swirling around her stiff nipple pulled a low cry from her lips. Dear Lord, but his touch made her willing to do whatever he asked. Even here, in a room far removed from the privacy of a bedchamber. She'd never been so totally out of control in her entire life. But she wanted his concession too.

Her hand slid down his chest and over the waistband of his trousers until she could feel the hard bulge straining for release. Uncertain as to whether her touch would affect him, she ran one fingernail down the rigid length of him. He jerked at her touch, his breaths deep and jagged as he lifted his head to stare into her eyes.

"Tell me what you want." His voice was low and harsh with desire.

"I want to hear you say you want me as much as I want you."

His green eyes darkened slightly as his large hands grasped her head. "It would seem that our desire is equal tonight, Countess. However, I won't wait any longer."

The moment his mouth captured hers, his hands lifted her skirts until her entire dress was scrunched together at her waist. Desire curled in her stomach until she ached with the need for his touch with a physical intensity. She barely registered the sound of him sweeping the table's place settings out of the way so he could press her down onto the table.

Spreading her legs apart, his fingers slid through the curls at her apex and stroked her as he'd done the day before. She jerked against his hand as wave after wave of heated sensation washed over her, engulfing her in a fiery blaze of desire.

As he caressed the sensitive spot between her legs, he leaned over her and sought the hardened peaks of her breasts. She uttered a sharp cry as he sucked on one nipple while playing with the other. Heaven help

her, but she wanted him inside her. Nothing mattered at this moment, not their age difference, his reputation or the desire for revenge that had brought them together. The only thing that mattered was that he possess her, over and over again until they tired of one another.

"Oh God. Please, Devlyn."

Lifting his head, his eyes burned through her and his face was dark with a passion that thrilled her. He wanted her. She stretched out her hand to him, and with a sharp movement, he unfastened his trousers and drove into her.

A deep groan flew from his mouth as she cried out at the moment of his possession. He was hot, thick and powerful inside her. Her muscles flexed around him and she wanted to weep at the intense pleasure of it. He withdrew and drove into her again. She expanded and contracted around him.

The tightness of her muscles around his cock filled him with the need to keep her like this forever. He shuddered at the orgasmic spasms rippling over his hard length. Christ, she was so tight and hot. He couldn't remember the last time he was ready to come so quickly.

How could this time be even better than yesterday when he'd made her his? The silky fire of her passage exploded around his cock, pulling him along on waves of hot pleasure. With one final plunge into the depths of her, he released a jubilant cry as she bucked against him amidst her own release.

Shaken by the intensity of their joining, he tried to control his ragged breathing. Staring down at her, he inhaled sharply. She was a magnificent buffet of creamy skin and rose-colored nipples. Her eyes met his, and he watched as her fingers trailed lazily over one of her nipples. Bloody Christ, he wanted her again.

Jerking her up, he crushed her lips beneath his, but she didn't retreat. Instead, she kissed him back as if it were their last hour on earth. It was intoxicating, maddening and far too close for comfort. He brushed aside the thought.

His desire for her would be spent by the break of dawn, but until then he'd plunder her sweetness over and over again until they were both exhausted. Drawing back from her, he quickly adjusted his clothing. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her begin to dress. Immediately he removed his coat and covered her breasts, then swept her up into his arms.

"No, Sophie. I'm not about to let you even think about dressing."

She smiled up at him. It was a womanly smile of surrender, and triumph surged through him. Walking toward the dining room door, he remembered the key was still in his coat pocket. To hell with the door. His boot crashed against the doorknob, and it gave way with a splitting screech. Pushing through the door with his wife in his arms, he headed upstairs. All the while, ignoring the fact that his wife's smile also held just a hint of satisfaction as well.



## Chapter 7

The soft murmur of voices pierced Sophie's sleep. Stirring beneath the covers, she yawned sleepily. Last night had been the most incredible night of her life. With each intimate possession, Devlyn had marked her with his masterful brand of pleasure. She'd never felt so alive, so womanly. Her body ached from all the activity, but it was the most delicious ache she'd ever experienced.

A door closed with a quiet thud and a moment later a warm hand slid beneath the comforter to cup her breast. She opened her eyes and met Devlyn's green eyes, which were flashing with wicked amusement. Fully dressed, he exuded the air of a country gentleman not the rake she knew him to be.

"Is it your habit to sleep in each morning?" He grinned at her.

"I always rise early."

"Do you call the hour of eleven early?"

Startled, she sat upright in bed the covers falling to her waist. "Eleven! Why on earth didn't you wake

me?"

"You were sleeping peacefully, and considering our athletics last night, I thought you needed your rest. Of course, it seems you're more than ready to continue our exercise program."

Warm color burned her cheeks, only to scorch her skin a second later. His thumb brushed over the hard nipple of her breast and she inhaled a quick breath. Heat stirred in her belly, quickly spreading itself downward. Somehow, she had to break this spell he was weaving around her. But she didn't know how. She wasn't even sure she wanted to quench this fire between them. Surely it would burn itself out soon enough. Why not enjoy it while it lasted?

Devlyn leaned into her, his mouth brushing across her shoulder as he pressed her back into the pillows. Bracing his arms on either side of her, he shifted his attention to her breasts. As his tongue teased first one nipple and then the other, a small moan escaped her lips. With a lithe movement, he stood up to stare down at her, his eyes twinkling with a wicked gleam of amusement.

"You're a tempting package, Lady Devlyn, but work calls. I'll arrange for Fischer to show you around the keep, and I'll join you later for dinner."

Suddenly aware he'd had no intentions of bedding her and had simply meant to tease her, she grabbed one of the pillows by her head and swung it at him. Laughing, he dodged the plump missile. With a wag of his finger, he made a chastising sound as he walked across the bedroom floor. Infuriated, she flung the pillow at him, which hit the door as he closed it behind him and his laughter.

Flinging herself back into the pillows, she glared after him. The man was far too dangerous for her peace of mind. Her gaze flew upward and she stared into the mirrors hanging over the bed. His bedroom had the most sinful décor she'd ever seen. Her irritation evaporated as she recalled his lovemaking.

It had been exhilarating and erotic to watch as Devlyn lavished her body with caresses last night. He'd driven her to the brink and beyond several times throughout the night. And each time she'd forgotten everything, except for his touch and the way he made her feel. If she didn't take care, she'd find herself falling in love with him. He'd warned her of such folly, and she intended to take his warning seriously.

A knock sounded on the door, and she quickly covered herself before entreating the visitor to enter. Seconds later, Emmie walked through the door. Grateful to see a familiar face, she smiled. The young girl smiled in return and offered Sophie the robe she carried.

The knowing expression on the girl's face made her cheeks warm. She could only imagine what the rest of the household must think given the way Devlyn had broken down the dining room door last night to carry her upstairs. She accepted the robe as Emmie turned away and crossed the room to a side door.

Climbing out of bed, Sophie returned to her bedroom through the door adjoining Devlyn's chamber with

hers. Once again, she found the room's aged furnishings in direct contrast to its well-kept appearance. She would have to ask Devlyn about monies for new furniture and other necessary ornamentations.

With Emmie's help, she dressed quickly and made her way downstairs where she found Fischer dusting the large mirror in the keep's main entrance. The high ceiling arches with their wood buttresses were vivid reminders that she was living in a centuries old fortress. The man greeted her warmly, and together they set out to explore her new home.

Everywhere she turned, there was something needing attention or remodeling. As the tour progressed, she realized what a monumental task she had before her. It would take years before the keep would be restored to its former glory. Did Devlyn have any idea what the true condition of his home was?

After several hours, Fischer ended his tour in the main salon, where Sophie gratefully sank down into a worn sofa. There was so much to do; she didn't even know how to begin. But begin she would. It was difficult not to be drawn to her new home. It was her husband's heritage. Devlyn had rescued her, now she would rescue his home.

"If I may be so bold, my lady?"

"Yes, of course, Fischer." She smiled at the kindly man.

"I know there's a great deal of work needing to be done here in the keep, but we'll all help to make it what it once was. We love the keep almost as much as his lordship does."

Grateful for the man's support, she leaned forward in her seat. "Thank you, Fischer, for that generous offer of support. I gratefully accept."

"And another thing, my lady, and most likely it's quite forward of me, but his lordship has been in my care since before his father died. I know he can be a bit irascible at times, but he's a good man. You won't find another like him in the whole of England. And from the look of things, I'd say you're just the right woman to bring out the best in him."

The fatherly love in the man's voice endeared Fischer to her, and she stood up to cross the floor. Laying a hand on the man's arm, she gently kissed his cheek. "And I'm certain that's quite forward of me as well, but I'm not an aristocrat, and I'm deeply touched by your kind words. I hope I'm able to live up to your expectations."

Fischer blushed down to his roots, his face a bright red as he shifted his gaze down to his feet. "Thank you, my lady, now I believe I should find you some tea. I'm certain you're parched from all the walking we've done this afternoon."

Thanking him, Sophie watched the older man leave the room then turned to inspect her surroundings. Of

all the rooms she'd been in today, this one seemed the most hopeless. The wallpaper wasn't just faded; it was also peeling away from the walls. Overhead the room's one saving grace was the impressive crystal chandelier. It was well cared for and gleamed in the afternoon sunlight that poured through one of the salon's front windows. She walked to the fireplace, her hand caressing the beautiful Italian marble mantle.

Outside the room, she heard loud voices in the main hall. Seconds later the salon doors flew open to reveal her father's rotund body in the doorway. Stiffening at the sight of him, she froze. Rage had turned his face beet red, and as he caught sight of her, his color took on a purple hue.

With a cry of outrage, he crossed the floor and before she could dart away, his hand cracked against the side of her face. "You traitorous bitch."

Sophie staggered under the brute force of the slap, struggling to remain on her feet. Straightening, she suppressed a tremor of fear. She inhaled a quick breath as she met her father's furious gaze.

"I fail to see how I've betrayed you, my lord."

"Don't try to mince words with me, woman. You know damn well how you've betrayed me. Well, if you think I'm going to let this marriage stand, think again."

"I hardly see how you can do anything about it, my lord. The marriage is quite legal, and it's been consummated more than once I can assure you. In fact, I might even be carrying Devlyn's child as we speak."

"You! With child!" Lord Townsend snorted with sarcastic amusement. "You're too old to have a child, Sophie. The only reason that bastard married you was because he wants to get back at me."

The words sliced through her. For the first time, she realized she wanted to give Devlyn a child. A son she could love and cherish when her husband tired of her. Her hands balled into fists as anger welled up inside her at her father's cruel, callous statement.

"That bastard, as you refer to him, is my husband, which makes me the Countess of Devlyn. For once in your life, have the couth to refrain from acting like the bourgeois you are by birth. A true gentleman would never behave in the manner you are presently exhibiting."

Fury darkened her father's face. As he stepped toward her menacingly, she trembled but held her ground. Her hands behind her back, her fingers brushed over the poker. Closing her hand over the tool, she pulled it out from behind her and pointed it at her father.

"Take one more step toward me, and I'll make you wish you had never sired me."

Surprise crossed his face, and he came to a halt. The sudden light of respect in his beady eyes infuriated her. All these years she'd tried to please him, and now that she was standing up to him, he actually seemed pleased.

"Well, Sophie. It seems you have more backbone than I realized. I'm delighted to see you're far from the meek mouse I've always believed you to be."

"I've never been a mouse, my lord. I simply wanted...." She couldn't say it. It was too much like begging. She was the Countess of Devlyn. Not a submissive daughter doing everything she could to earn her father's love. She refused to beg for his love. Never again would she beg anyone for anything.

"I'll ask you to leave, my lord. We have nothing further to say to one another."

"Don't you get uppity with me, Sophie. Get your belongings, you're coming with me."

"I'm not leaving my husband, Father."

"Husband? Husband! That bastard isn't fit to be anything."

"He was good enough for your precious Eleanor," she spat out with pent up bitterness.

"Well, we know what happened there. The bloody bastard got your sister pregnant and then refused to marry her."

"That's a lie, and you know it. Eleanor is a harlot."

If possible, her father's face grew darker with anger. "I ought to beat you within an inch of your life for saying such a thing, but as it is, I'm going to be gracious and take you home."

"Don't make me laugh. You don't even understand the meaning of the word gracious. You simply want an unpaid bookkeeper you can force to conceal your illegal business transactions."

"Damn it, woman. I'm your father, and you'll do as I say."

"Father?" She glared at him. All the pain of his rejections welled up in her as she sneered at him. "You don't know the meaning of the word. I've never had a father. You're simply the man who sired me."

With a wild cry of fury, he knocked aside the poker she held and reached for her. Fear streaked through her and she darted past him. A second later, a beefy hand grabbed her hair to yank her head back. Despite the pain, she refused to cower before a man who'd never spoken one word of love to her throughout her life.

As he dragged her toward the salon door, she caught one of his fingers and bent it back sharply. His cry of pain shrieked through the room, and he released her only to slap her again with enough force to knock her to the floor. The pain in her jaw brought tears to her eyes, but she held them back. She crawled to her feet and heard the sound of running feet. Standing upright, she turned to face her father, expecting him to hit her again. She met his hate-filled gaze as he stepped toward her, but a powerful figure in dark blue followed by two wolfhounds flew between them.

Acting as a protective shield, Beast pressed his large body against hers, his watchful gaze fixed on the scene across the room. Caesar stood a short distance behind Devlyn, his wiry body braced for an attack and his teeth bared as his master dealt with the threat to their mistress.

Devlyn looked like a man possessed as he forced her father backwards until the older man was pinned against the wall, Devlyn's arm pressed against the man's throat. Although he didn't raise his voice, Sophie could hear the raw fury in her husband's voice from where she stood several feet away.

"Where my wife is concerned, this is the only warning I'll ever give you. If you come near her again, I'll kill you. I also want you to know that I'm going to destroy you. I'm going to strip everything from you until you have only one option open to you, and that's to put a gun to your head and pull the trigger."

The suppressed violence in her husband's voice sent a chill down her spine. She'd known him capable of great fury, but not this cold, lethal rage. Her father had paled considerably, and he was gasping for air when Devlyn released him from the chokehold.

As Lord Townsend crossed the floor toward the exit, Sophie held her ground. The hate in her father's eyes made her flinch, but she simply held her head higher. When he was gone, a tremor rocked her body. A gentle hand touched her cheek causing her to jerk with reaction.

"Shhh. Let me have a look."

The dramatic change in him startled her. Tender concern had replaced the deadly expression on his face. His fingers gently probed where her father had last hit her. Over his shoulder, he spoke to Fischer.

"Bring me some ice to stop the swelling." The manservant vanished immediately and Devlyn continued to examine her face. "I'm sorry, Sophie. I should have known he'd come here. Thank God my business with the tenants finished earlier than I expected."

She trembled at the thought of her father and she squeezed her eyes shut to hold back the tears. Crying never solved anything, and she refused to let her father cause her any further pain. Suddenly Devlyn wrapped her in a tight embrace.

"Damn it, Sophie, go ahead and cry." The gruffness in his voice nearly undid her.

"No," she mumbled against his wool coat. "He's not worth it."

"I promise you, Sophie. I'm going to make him pay, and pay dearly."

Pulling back from him, she shook her head. "It doesn't matter anymore. I thought revenge would heal me, make me whole. But it won't do that."

"If you're asking me to forego my plans, I've already told you that won't happen." The steely expression on his dark features reflected his implacable tone of voice.

"No. I'm not asking you to do that. I'm simply saying that revenge won't heal the pain my father and Eleanor have caused me."

Fischer reentered the room with some ice wrapped in a cloth. Taking it from him, Devlyn gently applied it to her jaw. "You're going to have a nasty bruise there, but it will heal. I promise you. If the bastard ever comes near you again, I'll kill him. I protect what's mine."

The fierce possessive note in his words soothed her. Someone finally considered her worthy of protection. A tear slid down her cheek. Gentle fingers brushed it away. Her eyes met his, and her heart skipped a beat at the tenderness she saw in his gaze. Closing her eyes, she leaned into him and rested her head on his shoulder. Devlyn might never offer his heart to her, but he would care for her, protect her, and that was worth more to her than all the gold in the world.

## Chapter 8

With a whirr of steel against steel, Sophie clipped a rich, blood-red Beauharnais rose off the bush in front of her. She put the blossom up to her nose and inhaled the deep fragrance of the flower. The rose joined its companions in the basket she held as she reached out to retrieve another blossom off an adjoining bush.

Humming a light tune, she snipped the rose and laid it in her basket. In the past week, Devlyn had shown her how wonderful life could be. He had a zest for living that amazed her, and he was the most attentive, amorous lover she could have ever dreamed of having. She'd even begun to hope he might be coming to care for her some. Despite every bit of her willpower and determination, she couldn't deny the way he made her feel every time he touched her.

He had this power to turn her inside out with a word or touch. The sound of his voice sent ripples of anticipation over her entire body, while just the touch of his hand could make her explode and writhe in a torrid rush of desire. She only wished she had the power to make him feel the same way.

What would he do if she became the aggressor? Would he spurn her, or would he find it arousing? She remembered how much he liked her playing with him, squeezing him. She'd even been daring enough in their lovemaking to kiss his hard length. It had been like rough velvet against her lips, and his groans of delight had rumbled from his throat like those of a fierce lion.

She smiled to herself. The impropriety of her thoughts would have shocked her a week ago. But now? Now, she didn't care about how wicked or risqué her thoughts were. The sight of her husband always aroused a ravenous hunger for the pleasure of his touch. And she wanted him to experience the same with her. She wanted him to beg her for her touch.

Well, perhaps beg was the wrong word. Commanding her to touch him would be more Devlyn's style, but however he did it, in her mind he was fully aroused, besotted with desire that he would never let her go. She sighed. They were fantasies, nothing more.

After all, she was a realist. No matter how much she enjoyed his touch, she was certain it was simply infatuation. What woman wouldn't love to have a man such as Devlyn pursuing her? His reputation simply enhanced the danger he exuded with his masterful behavior and devastating charm. She cut another rose from the bush, and as it fell into her basket, she breathed in the scent of sandalwood. Before she could turn around, a strong arm wrapped around her waist, while a firm pair of lips grazed the nape of her neck.

"Good morning, Countess. You're acting quite cheerful this afternoon."

As always, his touch warmed her skin leaving her with a craving for more. Unwilling to turn into him, lest he think her completely under his spell, she pulled away with a small laugh.

"Would you prefer I act gloomy and dour?" She cast a glance over her shoulder and arched an eyebrow at him.

"God no. Come, put the flowers down and walk with me."

"But they need water. I can't just cut them, and leave them out in the sun."



"There are dozens more you can cut. Leave them."

He extended his hand with his usual air of command. Heaving a sigh, she set the basket in the shade of several bushes and turned to face him.

"There, are you satisfied?"

"Quite." His fingers gestured arrogantly for her to accept his hand. "Come."

She berated herself at the way she willingly acquiesced to his command. Why couldn't she show some backbone and simply ignore him? The answer to that was easy. Devlyn wasn't a man one could ignore. Her hand slipped into his and he smiled with satisfaction.

The smile warmed her. Blast. She really needed to learn some control where he was concerned. He would soon lose interest if she continued this habit of giving in to him without so much as a protest. The idea wasn't a pleasant one. The reality was she didn't want such a thing to happen. It was a sobering thought.

Devlyn tucked her hand in the crook of his arm, pulling her deeper into the garden. In the distance was a small arboretum tucked among tall hedges and surrounded by a small copse of trees. They walked in silence, and unwilling to contemplate the future, Sophie's mind wandered back to the erotic ideas she'd been considering before he'd joined her in the garden.

In her mind, she envisioned him seated naked in front of her. His arousal would be long, hard and thick. He'd recline back in his chair and with that devilish smile of his call her to him. The thought of kneeling in front of him to caress his body with her tongue created a rush of warmth between her legs. She swallowed hard, hoping to banish the thoughts from her head.

"You're preoccupied."

"Wha-what?" She spared him only a quick glance before returning her eyes to the ground in front of them.

"Wherever you were, it was obviously pleasurable. Tell me what you were thinking."

They'd reached the gazebo, and Devlyn stepped into the semi-darkness of the lattice-covered structure pulling her with him. With a deft turn of his hand, he spun her around to face him. Staring down into her eyes, he arched his brow.

"You're looking quite guilty, Sophie. Tell me what you were thinking, or I'll extract a suitable punishment."

"It was of ... of a personal nature."

There, that was the truth without describing her fantasy. That should satisfy him. He eyed her carefully for a long moment before he made to turn away. Relief sagged through her only to become dismay an instant later as he wheeled back in her direction.

"Exactly how do you describe thoughts of a personal nature, Sophie? Surely, you don't think to keep secrets from me."

"No ... of course not ... I was simply ... thinking about...." She bit her lip and turned her head away from him. "Please, it's embarrassing."

"Hmm, now you've definitely piqued my interest. Explain these mortifying thoughts of yours."

"They were ... were about ... pleasing you." She peeked a quick look at him, expecting him to be amused, but saw puzzlement instead.

"Whatever gave you the idea that you don't please me?"

"I didn't actually. I simply ... well... Blast! I meant I was thinking about how I could give you pleasure."

He seemed stunned by her revelation before he turned away from her. Mortified by his obvious rejection, she quickly darted across the gazebo's wooden floor toward the exit. A strong hand halted her flight. With a gentle tug, he pulled her back against him, his hand splayed across her stomach just below her breasts.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" he growled softly in her ear.

"I have more flowers to cut."

"Running away, Sophie?"

Bristling at the amusement in his voice, she twisted around in his arms and glared up at him. "Don't be absurd."

He nipped her ear with teasing lips before kissing the side of her neck. "Then tell me what you were thinking."

"I told you, I was thinking about pleasing you."

"Tell me in detail." This time the gentle mockery in his voice made her narrow her gaze at him. If he

thought to embarrass her, it would fail. No, it was time to test her power. Her capabilities as a woman.

She studied him for a long moment, deliberately wetting her lips with the tip of her tongue. When she saw his green eyes flash with desire, she reached up and traced his mouth with her forefinger.

"As you wish, my lord." She smiled slowly. "I was imagining you naked."

"Naked." He inhaled a sharp breath. It pleased her.

"Yes, you were sitting in a chair so that I could see all of you."

"And you. What were you doing Sophie?" His voice throbbed.

"Me? Oh, I was dressed and kneeling at your feet." With a lazy movement, her fingers trailed down his jaw.

"And while you were kneeling, were you doing anything?" His breathing was now rapid and raspy.

"Was I doing anything?" She smiled for a moment and licked her lips once more. "Why yes, I do believe I was."

A low growl reverberated in his throat, as he stood motionless in front of her. As he stared down into eyes, the fire in his gaze heated her blood. God, but she wished they were inside so she could live out her fantasy. From his expression, it was something he wanted too.

"Close your eyes, Sophie."

"Whatever for?" She shook her head in puzzlement.

"Do it," he ordered harshly. "And don't open them until I tell you do so."

Slowly she did as he commanded. As she stood there unable to see him, she heard small sounds that were familiar, but couldn't clearly place. After a long moment, she heard his voice off to one side ordering her to open her eyes.

Turning her head, she gasped with shocked surprise. "Oh dear Lord! Are you mad? Someone might come along!"

"Which makes it all the more exciting, don't you think?" He grinned at her as he lounged back against the railing of the gazebo.

Naked and fully aroused, his beautiful body sent a thread of excitement charging through her. Her mouth went dry and her palms grew damp as she studied him. Her eyes drifted across his body, inciting a desire to taste him. Taste all of him, especially his hard erection, which jutted out from his firm, muscular thighs. He was beautiful, and she was the reason he was so aroused. For just a moment, she glanced over her shoulder afraid someone might stumble across them.

"Haven't you learned not to be timid by now?" His question made her jerk her gaze back to him.

"I hardly think--"

"Adventure is never for those who think." Devlyn crooked his finger at her, an arrogant smile on his face. "Now then, you were saying you were at my feet."

Dazed by his outrageous behavior, and yet thrilled by the daring of it all, she shook her head. "Dear God, Devlyn, what if someone comes out here?"

"We're quite safe from prying eyes, Sophie. Come here."

She stared at him for a long moment, and he arched an eyebrow at her. The challenge in his expression made her remember what she'd started. Determined to regain the power she'd lost at his audacious behavior, she locked her gaze with his and moved forward. Reaching him, she knelt in front of him, her hands on his knees.

"Shall I show you what I was doing on my knees, my lord?"

"Yes," he rasped.

With a firm touch, she slid her hands to the inside of his thighs and pushed his legs apart. He was glorious in his maleness, and his arousal enticed her. Sprawled out in front of her, he was hers for the taking, and she reveled in the knowledge. She slid a hand slowly over his thigh, just past his erection and up his well-muscle chest.

Her fingers brushed over his nipple as she pushed herself forward and leaned into him. His erection jumped as her dress caressed his hard length. It made her want to kiss him right now, but she wanted to make him wild with desire. She pressed her lips to his chest then suckled at his nipple as he often did with her. A deep groan rumbled in his throat, and she gently nipped at his rigid peak.

While her lips were teasing his chest, her hand reached between them and cupped the two large sacs beneath the long, hot length of him. He sucked in a sharp breath. She pulled back from him, cradling him in the palm of her hand. There was a glazed look in his green eyes, and she smiled.

This was what it meant for a woman to be powerful in the bedroom. His expression revealed the heat

searing through him--heat for her. Her gaze still riveted on his face, she stroked him with one finger. He jumped at the touch.

Leaning forward, she pressed her lips to the solid length of him. He growled with pleasure, and her fingers kneaded the inside of his thigh as she feathered light kisses along his erection. In her fantasy, she'd used her tongue to caress his hard staff with long, leisurely strokes. She did so now, delighted with the rumbles of pleasure echoing over her head as her tongue swirled across his hot length. The tip of her tongue edged around the tip of him, and she tasted a salty bead of desire.

The taste of him startled her. He was close to an orgasm. Sweet heaven, only a wicked woman would engage in such behavior in the middle of the lawn, in broad daylight. She rocked back on her heels and stared up at him. The hot need in his face caressed her, flushing her skin with fire. It might be wicked, but dear Lord how she loved making him look ready to explode with passion.

"That's not what you were really thinking of doing, is it?" The hoarse sound of his voice startled her.

"I don't know what you mean."

"You weren't just kissing my cock in your fantasy. You were sucking on me, weren't you?" His language appalled and excited her all at the same time.

"I ... I...."

"I want your lips on me, Sophie. I want you to suck on my cock. Suck on me, now."

The ferocity in his voice was emphasized by the steely touch of his fingers at the nape of her neck. His touch was gentle, but unwavering as he guided her head forward until her lips hovered over the tip of him.

The decadent appeal of taking him into her mouth was wickedly tantalizing, and she flicked out her tongue to swirl around the tip of him. Her hands rested on his thighs, and his muscles tensed beneath her fingers as she stroked the long length of him with her tongue. A dark groan poured out of his throat. When she glanced up at him, she saw his eyes were closed.

As her fingers brushed over the large sacs hanging below his engorged staff, he jumped visibly. She was in control once more. She was the one with the power. He was at her mercy, and the knowledge enthralled her. Once more, she slid her tongue up and across him. His cock jumped at her touch, and she smiled.

"Do you like that, my lord?"

"Christ yes," he growled.

Certain that there was pleasure in the anticipation of the act, she nibbled at the top of him before her tongue glided along the underside of his erection. Another groan accompanied her caresses, and she gently wrapped her lips around the tip of him and slowly took him into her mouth.

Wicked decadence was the only description she could think of for this sinful act. Knowing it gave him pleasure heightened her own sense of excitement. Her fingers circled him at the bottom of his shaft as she slid her mouth down further. The sensation of his hands threading through her pinned up curls surprised her as he guided her to imitate the intimate act they'd performed so many times in recent nights.

He tightened in her mouth and she swept her tongue over the rigid length of him. Another groan rumbled deep in his throat as he gently bucked against her lips. Sweet Lord, she'd never realized how exciting it could be to hear his groans of pleasure. She tightened her lips around him creating a suction that made his fingers tense in her hair.

"Christ Jesus. Faster, go faster."

Obedying the command, she quickly increased the pace of her mouth moving over him. Over her head, she could hear his rapid breathing and commands for her to continue. Beneath her tongue, his erection stiffened and throbbed. Then with a quick movement, he pushed her off him and spilled his seed onto his stomach. Sinking back on her heels, she watched in fascination as he reclined against the bench railing, a satiated look on his face.

Satisfaction sailed through her. She'd pleased the Devil of Devlyn's Keep. A nasty little voice reminded her it was doubtful she was the only woman to please him. She shoved the thought aside. She would live in the present, and at the moment, she and she alone had pleased her husband.

Scrambling to her feet, she retrieved a handkerchief from Devlyn's coat pocket and returned to remove the milky white fluid from his stomach. At her touch, he opened his eyes and his hand slid around to grasp the nape of her neck.

"You, my sweet, are the most devilish wanton I've ever met."

She heard the endearment, but found it difficult to believe he'd spoken it. It was the first time he'd ever spoken with such affection before. Staring down at him, she saw a flash of emotion darken his green eyes before he captured her lips in a hard kiss. Bracing her hands on his warm, sculpted chest, she sighed with pleasure into his mouth. From a distance, she heard a voice calling out, and she stiffened. With a quick shove, she pushed her way out of his arms and straightened. Again, she heard the voice as it drew closer.

"Oh my God, it's Spencer."

A chuckle rippled from Devlyn's throat as he stood up and caught her from behind. His lips nuzzled at

her shoulder while his hand hugged her breast. "You worry too much."

"Blast it, Devlyn! Will you dress? My brother will think the worst."

"Your brother knows me and my reputation. Then of course there's the fact that we are married."

"Married or not, I'll not have him thinking I lift my skirts for you in a public place."

"Ah, but Countess, you didn't lift your skirts. You simply enjoyed the taste of my cock."

The teasing laughter in his voice appalled and amused her at the same time. Spencer's voice called out for them again from a short distance away. Wheeling around in Devlyn's arms, she kissed him hard.

"If you don't dress now, I swear I'll refuse to taste your cock in the future. Now dress!"

She ignored the stunned delight on his face as she pushed herself out of his arms. Almost at a run, she hurried from the gazebo and down the path toward her brother. As she raced along the pebbled walkway, she prayed Devlyn would hurry. She didn't want Spencer to think badly of him. It wouldn't do for her brother to think ill of the man she loved.

The thought brought her to a halt, her breath stolen away by the revelation. Dear God, how could she have committed such folly? She was mad. She had to be. Only a madwoman would fall in love with the Devil of Devlyn's Keep. Mad or not, she couldn't deny the inevitable. She'd done the one thing she'd sworn not to do. She'd fallen in love with her husband.

## Chapter 9

Devlyn grinned as his wife scurried out of the gazebo. God help him, but his wife had a wicked tongue. The memory of it swirling around his cock made him hard again. Damnation, he needed to learn more

control.

He heard Sophie greeting her brother, and he moved quickly. It would embarrass her if Spencer Hamilton caught him in such a state. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her. Hell, he wanted to give her a present.

It was the reason he'd brought her to the gazebo in the first place. Then her deliciously sinful fantasy had distracted him. Everything about Sophie distracted him. She was becoming an addiction, and if he weren't careful, his wife would have him at her mercy. Dressing with speed, he was knotting his tie when he heard her voice calling out to him.

"Devlyn, will you please come out of hiding? Spencer has come for a visit."

Stepping out of the gazebo, he moved several paces down the garden path and around the large hedge encircling the small building. The look of relief on her face tugged a smile to his lips. "I'd hardly call walking through the gardens as hiding, my sweet."

It was the second time he'd spoken so affectionately to her, and he found he liked the sound of it. She was incredibly sweet. Sweet, sensual and passionate. And she was his.

He shook Hamilton's hand before his gaze swept back to his wife. There was a stricken look about her that worried him. Had her brother said something to trouble her? Narrowing his eyes at her, her gaze met his. Immediately, she smiled and he frowned. Had he imagined her expression of dismay?

"I apologize for the intrusion, but I wanted to say good-bye to Phe."

"Good-bye?" Sophie frowned, her eyes flashing with anger. "Did Father throw you out? You know you can always stay here."

She looked at him, silently pleading with him to concur. "She's right, Hamilton. If you need a place to stay, you're welcome here."

The younger man eyed him cautiously for a moment before he nodded an acceptance of the peace between the two of them. "Thank you, but it's not a drastic situation. The manor was only tolerable when you were there, Phe. Now it's simply a suffocating environment. I informed Father that I wanted to inspect the London properties he awarded me last year. He accepted that excuse."

"Well, at least you know you're always welcome here," Sophie squeezed her brother's hand.

Smiling in return, Hamilton arched an eyebrow. "It seems marriage agrees with you, Phe. I've never seen you look so radiant."



A blush flared in his wife's cheeks, and Devlyn chuckled. "More likely the bloom on her cheeks is from anger. I seem to provoke that reaction in her, among others."

"She can be hotheaded from time to time."

"Indeed. I'm learning how wicked her tongue can be." Beside him, Sophie inhaled a sharp breath at the veiled reference. He grinned at her. "A fact which has prevented me from telling her my news for almost an hour."

"News?"

Their voices chimed in unison. Hamilton straightened with interest, while Sophie looked like she was ready to kill him. He only hoped it would be a sweet death such as the one she'd just given him in the gazebo.

"Yes, my ships reached port two days ago, and I've already recouped my investment and my funds have nearly tripled."

"I say, that's news which warrants a celebration."

He nodded at his brother-in-law's cheerful comment. "I agree. And I've made arrangements for Sophie and me to visit London."

"London," she gasped.

"I've arranged for Devlyn House in Mayfair to be opened, and I've secured a new box at the Alhambra."

"Good God, don't tell me Sophie's convinced you to take her to the opera." Hamilton's exclamation earned him a scathing look from Sophie.

"I'm not all that fond of any theater, but I've yet to give my wife a wedding present, and I believe this is an appropriate one." He smiled at her expression of delight before frowning as her pleasure abruptly turned to dismay.

"But I haven't anything to wear."

"Ah, the proverbial cry of all women. You needn't fret, Countess. I'll see to it you'll have a dozen new frocks." He grinned as he leaned toward her and pressed his lips against her ear. "But I much prefer you naked and between my legs."

Her gasp made him laugh. Releasing her, he clapped his brother-in-law on the shoulder. "Come,

Hamilton. Your sister was cutting flowers. Let's leave her to that task. I have some fine brandy we can drink to toast my success, and it's time the two of us got better acquainted."

As he guided the younger man toward the keep, he risked a quick glance back at Sophie. Her embarrassment had given way to outrage and she was glaring at him with daggers in her eyes. Yes, his wanton Countess was as fiery as they came, and it only made him desire her that much more.

\* \* \* \*

The noise in the Alhambra's main lobby was deafening. The crush provided him with one more reason to despise the opera. He wanted nothing better than to escape this wild zoo of humanity. An acquaintance caught his eye, and he offered a nod in the direction of the man.

He deliberately looked away to avoid talking with the man. The last thing he wanted to do was add fuel to the gossip mill running rampant since their arrival in London more than two weeks ago. No matter where they went, someone was trying to find out more information about his marriage, and he was damned if it was anyone else's business.

He recognized another individual and he heaved a grunt of exasperation. If Sophie didn't return from the ladies room shortly, he'd create a stir by going in and retrieving her. At least they'd have some privacy in their box.

"Devlyn! Is that you, old man?"

At the sound of his name, he turned his head to see Sir Archibald Millard pushing through the crowd to reach him. Groaning inwardly at the sight of the man, he tightened his lips. Schoolmates at Eton, the man had been a thorn in his side ever since. Millard considered himself a wit, but Devlyn found him nothing short of boring.

Dark hair already thinning on top and his middle section already beginning to sport a paunch, Sir Archibald was the epitome of a man who considered himself a connoisseur of all things, but truly mastered none.

A moment later, Devlyn found his hand grasped by Sir Archibald's beefy one. "I say, Devlyn, you're the talk of the town."

"Am I?" He deliberately drawled his reply to indicate distinct boredom. It didn't have the effect he'd hoped. Sir Archibald plunged on with his babbling.

"Of course you are. Why everyone's talked of nothing else. It's one thing to have an older woman for your mistress, but Good God, man, for a wife?"

"I wasn't aware that age had anything to do with marriage."

"Well of course it does. No respectable man would marry a woman twice his age."

Anger made him grit his teeth. Either the bastard was a complete ass or he was being insulting. It didn't matter. He wasn't going to let someone talk about Sophie in such a disparaging manner. Narrowing his eyes, he leaned into the man.

"My wife is not twice my age and even if she were, it wouldn't be any of your concern. So unless you--" Sir Archibald acted as if he'd not heard a word, his gaze fixed on something over Devlyn's shoulder.

"Good God, who is that ravishing creature?"

Devlyn turned his head to see Sophie heading toward them. She did look ravishing, but he was damned if he wanted Sir Archibald noticing. Her chin was tilted at a stubborn angle, and her cheeks were flushed with color, while her large hazel eyes sparkled with anger. Damnation, something had happened. Had one of his old mistresses taunted her? He should have known better than to bring her here tonight.

Beside him, Sir Archibald elbowed him and laughed. "I should have known better. You might have married, but giving up your light skirts wasn't part of the contract. You've excellent taste as always, Devlyn. She's exquisite. When you tire of her, let me know."

Muscles tightened with raw fury as he restrained himself from pulverizing the man with his fists. As Sophie reached them, he took her hand and raised it to his lips. "Well, Countess. Are you ready to take a seat in our box?"

Beside him, Sir Archibald started violently. Ignoring the man, he wrapped Sophie's arm through the crook of his elbow and pulled her toward the stairs. There was a strained look to her smile, and he noted the stares the two of them were receiving. He turned his head so his mouth was close to her ear.

"Who's upset you?"

She flashed him a quick glance before looking away. "What makes you think I'm upset?"

"It might only be a month since we exchanged our vows, Sophie, but I know you better than you think."

"It's nothing. I knew there would be talk." With a graceful move, she lifted the front of her skirt as they

climbed the stairs to the second level of the theater. "It seems we've created quite a stir with our marriage."

"To hell with them. They don't matter. They'll find something else for the rumor mill within a fortnight."

"I know. I just didn't expect people to be quite so vicious." There was a woebegone expression in her eyes as he ushered her into their box. Something else was bothering her as well, but she was unwilling to share it with him. The thought irritated him. As they took their seats, he saw the crowd stir and look toward their box. A tremor shot through Sophie, and he leaned toward her.

"Have I told you how beautiful you look tonight?"

The flush of color in her cheeks pleased him as she laughed. Flicking open her fan in an elegant gesture, she shook her head at him. "That brandy you had before we left home has dulled your senses, Devlyn. However, I appreciate your gallantry."

Annoyed, he grasped her hand and turned it over to examine her wrist displayed in the small, circular opening of her evening glove. Following the edge of the silk circle, he trailed a path across her skin with his forefinger. She trembled at the touch and he smiled. "Haven't you learned by now, that I'm far from gallant? A rake rarely is."

"Very well then, but how do you explain tonight? You hate the opera. You've told me so yourself. How do you explain your presence here tonight?"

Releasing her hand, he leaned closer, his hand pressing against her knee. "I'm here because I'm waiting for the proper moment to seduce my wife in a public place."

Her gasp tugged a smile to his mouth, and her cheeks darkened with color. "You're mad."

"No, Countess, not mad. Simply adventurous. Think about it. You enjoy my fingers sliding through those dark curls between your legs. What if I were to touch you like that, here, once the opera started?"

"You wouldn't," she said in a strangled voice.

"It would be exciting, don't you think? Think about the danger of it."

"I don't wish to think about it."

"Why not? Think about it, Countess. What if I were to make love to you within earshot of all these people."

"It's impossible."

"Ah, so the thought excites you as well." He watched her breasts as they rose and fell at a rapid pace. Her excitement was clearly evident.

"Ye ... no, I simply meant... Blast it, Devlyn. Must you tease me like this?"

"And must you tease me with the thought of sucking on those glorious nipples of yours? Are they hard now, Sophie?" He heard the way her breathing was soft rasps crossing her lips. "Are they hard like I like them?"

The question pulled a low moan from her throat. "Oh God, yes."

Hazel eyes wide in her face, she turned to look at him. Desire glowed in her gaze, and he smiled. "And once I finished with your nipples, I'd find it equally pleasurable to put my mouth against you, drinking that delicious cream of yours."

"For pity's sake, Devlyn, stop." Her fan fluttered frantically in front of her face.

"Tell me, my sweet. Are you wet there now? If I were to stroke that sensitive little nub of yours would you buck against my hand like a wild thing?"

"Damn you, Devlyn." Her voice was hoarse as several shudders shook through her. He smiled with satisfaction.

"No matter how small the orgasm, they're still quite gratifying, wouldn't you say so, Sophie?"

"You're wicked through and through."

He leaned into her, his nostrils picking up her musky scent. "Tell me the truth. You love it when I'm being wicked. You like the danger and excitement of it all."

She opened her mouth quickly in an attempt to deny his statement, but he simply stared her into admitting the truth. "Yes. Yes, I like it when you're being wicked."

Drawing back from her, he reclined back in his chair as the gas lights in the theater dimmed. As the hall filled with music, Sophie leaned toward him.

"And you, my lord," she whispered. "What about your needs?"

"My needs?" He eyed her carefully in the shadows. A slow smile curved her lips as she met his gaze. The

minx was up to something.

"But of course, my lord. Surely you have need of something hot and wet around you as well."

He swallowed quickly as her hand slid discreetly up his leg to his crotch. Her touch was light as she stroked her fingers across his cock. It grew solid and firm in an instant. She pretended to watch the opening of the opera as her fingers toyed with his trouser buttons. Bloody hell, he should have known the woman would retaliate. But God, it was a delicious retaliation.

"Are you offering to take me in your mouth, Countess?"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? I can feel how hard you are. Imagine how much harder you'd be if I took you in my mouth."

Her palm caressed him, and he struggled to suppress the groan waiting to escape his mouth. God but the woman was a temptress hell-bent on repaying him for his earlier teasing.

"Christ, woman. Take care with your words."

"You started this little game, my lord. How could you possibly want to quit now? Especially when my mouth is so willing to assuage your need."

"Bloody hell." His cock tightened with an exquisite pain, and her hand rubbed over him before she squeezed the tip of him with gentle fingers.

"Shall we find a dark corner in which to indulge our sin, my lord? Or perhaps it would be best to simply ponder the idea until we return home. "

Satisfaction curled the corners of her mouth, and he groaned as she turned away to watch the performance on the stage below. Sweet Jesus, but she'd turned the tables on him. A fire burned inside him, and he wanted to pull her down to the floor and rut like a wild animal. How the hell had he come to such a passion?

He'd never had a woman twist his insides like this. Not even Eleanor had driven him toward such a primitive, carnal need. But this woman, his beautiful, wanton Countess, had merely to smile and utter a few well-chosen words and he was jelly in her hands.

A wild thought careened through his head, and he froze. It wasn't possible. No, he was mad to even think it. God, he needed a drink. Rising to his feet, he touched her shoulder as she looked up at him.

"Forgive me. I'd forgotten why I despised the opera so much. This caterwauling has reminded me, so I'm

going to take my leave of you."

A mischievous smile curled her mouth. "Shall I come with you?"

"No," he said harshly. "I'll send the carriage back for you."

Puzzlement furrowed her brow, but she nodded quietly and didn't protest. Leaving the theater box, he stood in the quiet hallway, his back pressed against the wall. He refused to believe it. He couldn't believe it. Rakes never fell in love, especially with their wives. No, a rake would walk out of here right now and drink himself into a stupor. That or find a mistress. No. That he couldn't do.

With a violent shove of his arms, he pushed himself away from the wall and strode down the passage. As he entered the vestibule at the top of the stairs, which connected the corridors lining both sides of the theater, he saw Eleanor coming toward him.

How could he have ever thought her beautiful? Even from this short distance, it was impossible to ignore the hardness of her blue eyes or the calculating twist to her finely shaped lips. He turned away and started down the steps. Her voice forced him to stop.

"Devlyn, surely you're not leaving. I've not even had a moment to offer you my congratulations."

He slowly turned his head to meet her gaze. "Forgive me, Lady Shively, but I don't want your congratulations."

"You're being far too cruel, Devlyn. The past is behind us. You're my brother-in-law now. Surely we can at least be civil to each other for Sophie's sake."

With a snort of disgust, he shook his head. "Civility is not for the likes of you and me, Lady Shively. Good night."

Not waiting for her response, he hurried down the stairs and out of the theater. All he wanted to do was to go home and drink himself into oblivion. It took several minutes for his carriage to arrive outside the Alhambra. Without waiting for the new footman to open the vehicle's door, he opened it himself and flung his body onto the soft padded cushions.

Throughout the ride home, he tried to comprehend what course of action he should take, but he still had no answers when the coach rolled up in front of Devlyn Townhouse. Leaving the driver with orders to return to the theater for Sophie, he entered the house and ensconced himself in the library with two bottles of brandy.

It took him little time to deaden his senses with the first decanter of liquor, and by that time, he had removed his jacket and waistcoat, undone his tie and opened his shirt at the throat. He took another deep

swig of brandy and stared into the fireplace. Already his head was throbbing and his movements lethargic.

Bloody hell, he'd not be capable of performing tonight. And damn it, he wanted to perform. He wanted to find a way of washing his wife out of his blood. There had to be a way to do so. He simply needed to think. A mirthless chuckle rolled out of his throat. He was in no condition to think. If anything, he was having trouble keeping his eyes open. Sleep, that was a decision that took no effort to make.

Even with his eyes closed, images of Sophie filled his head. She was a vision he couldn't escape even if he tried. And heaven help him, he didn't want to try. She was the best thing that had ever happened to him. No woman had ever touched his heart the way his wife had.

His thoughts crashed together as he sank lower into his drunken haze. Sophie would be home soon, and he needed to have an answer as to why he'd left the theater so abruptly. She'd think it was her fault. Christ, he didn't want to think anymore. It was too much trouble to think.

He jerked his head up. Thinking, that's what he'd been trying to do. God, he was drunk. His head fell back against the leather chair as he closed his eyes. In the foyer, the clock chimed the hour of eleven. Any minute she'd be home. A light touch pierced his stupor as her gentle hands slid across his thighs. He groaned as she brushed her fingers over him. Damnation, he'd gotten drunk to avoid feeling her touch, and now even in his stupor she was still able to torture him. Grasping her hands, he tugged her upward. As he did so, he caught the faint aroma of an exotic scent. He forced his eyes open and stared into Eleanor's hard blue gaze.

"What the hell are you doing--?"

From out in the foyer, he heard Sophie's laughter as she said something to Fischer. The sound of her voice drew near, and in his drunken state, he moved too slowly. Before he could push Eleanor aside, the study door opened and in that small instant, the woman crushed her lips against his. With a growl of fury, he pushed her away from him, and looked toward the doorway where Sophie stood.

"Christ almighty ... Sophie, it's not what you think."

Pale, serene and regal, his wife smiled coldly. "Nothing is ever as it seems, my lord. Forgive me for intruding on you and your slut."

The door closed softly behind her as he staggered to his feet. He nearly fell down as he stumbled over Eleanor who was lying at his feet laughing. For the first time, he clearly saw the state of his sister-in-law's dishabille. Her gown was open to reveal the tops of her breasts and her hair had been artfully disarranged to give the impression she'd been in the heat of passion. The bitch had deliberately set him up, but why?



He wanted to go after Sophie, but first he need to rid himself of this malicious creature. Reaching down, he dragged her to her feet by the hair on her head. She squealed her protest.

"God damn it, Devlyn, let me go."

His fist locked in her hair. He yanked her head back and stared down into her bitter, triumphant gaze. "First you're going to tell me what you're doing here."

"Revenge, Devlyn. Nothing more, nothing less. You refused me. I couldn't allow my older sister to have you unchallenged. Besides, Father and I wanted to give you something special for your wedding present."

His fingers tightened in her hair and he smiled cruelly as she winced. "Always the little whore to please your father. Did it ever occur to you that I despise you?"

"Of course, but it changes nothing. I succeeded in putting a wedge between you and my sister that will never heal. Sophie knows all too well how easily I can usurp her in a gentleman's affections."

The vicious laughter peeling from her lips disgusted him. With a roar, he pulled her toward the main foyer. As he dragged her across the marble floor to the front door, she kept batting at his arms in an effort to make him release her. Throwing open the door he barely controlled his impulse to shove her down the steps. Instead, he made sure she was clear of the door, then slammed it in her face.

Turning back toward the stairs, his blurred gaze traveled up to the second floor landing. Now he needed to convince Sophie that what she'd seen had been staged. His head thundered with pain, and he experienced a short bout of discomfort in his stomach. Bloody hell, he needed some coffee before he could even consider confronting Sophie. He was in no condition to argue with her. Sobriety was the order of the moment.

## Chapter 10

Sophie locked her bedroom door behind her. She doubted Devlyn would try to enter her room, but she didn't want to take the chance. Her gaze traveled to the door connecting their room, and she moved to lock that one as well. Protected from unwelcome intrusions, she walked slowly toward the middle of the room. Her listless fingers undid her cloak. It slid to the floor unnoticed. Dazed, a shiver ran through her, and she stumbled toward the fire.

Stretching out her hands, she tried to warm her icy fingers. Another shiver crashed through her, and she sank to her knees, praying for the fire to make her warm again. It was like a bad dream. She should have known something was wrong when Devlyn had left the theater so abruptly. But never in her wildest nightmares had she expected to see what she'd found in the library.

He was more of a rake than she'd ever dreamed him to be. He'd teased her with the intimacy of a lover at the theater only to return home and rut with her sister. She squeezed her eyes shut tightly. Eleanor. Always Eleanor.

The pain of betrayal surged through her with the strength of a wild bull. It gored through her body until tears streamed down her cheeks. God, how could she have been so stupid? She'd been realistic enough to know his attraction for her wouldn't last. She'd expected this, his need for a younger woman, but she'd never contemplated it would be her sister.

She'd thought he possessed honor, but she knew now how wrong she'd been. An honorable man would never have done to her what he had done tonight. Betraying her with another woman might be a forgivable sin, but to betray her with Eleanor was reprehensible. How could he have done this when he knew what her sister had done to her? And Eleanor. What depraved nature made her sister hate her so much that coveting her husband was amusing? For Eleanor had been quite amused. She'd been laughing as Devlyn had stumbled to his feet.

The cruelty of it nauseated her. Her stomach lurched and she pressed the back of her hand to her mouth to keep from retching. What was she going to do? Staring into the flames, she tried to find an answer, but none was forthcoming. She was so cold. Why didn't the warmth of the fire penetrate her body? It was as if she were dead.

Yes, that's what it was. She was dead. She'd made the mistake of falling in love with her husband, a renowned rake, and now she was paying the price. What had made her think that Devlyn would be any different from all the other men she'd met or known?

Every man she'd ever known or loved had failed to see her wants or needs. Even Spencer, as much as she loved him, had never understood how unbearable her life at Townsend Manor was. He had always been able to leave. She couldn't.

So, she'd adapted and persevered in spite of her father's uncaring attitude. When she'd propositioned Devlyn, she'd wanted two things. Escape from her father's house and the experience of a lover's touch. She'd truly believed it possible to keep herself distanced from him while experiencing sexual pleasure in his arms.

Well, she'd experienced what she'd wanted and in doing so had lost her heart. Devlyn had never claimed to be anything else but what he was, a notorious rake with no desire to remain faithful to a wife almost twice his age. It shouldn't surprise her. After all, she'd proposed this mad arrangement to Devlyn. She'd known what would eventually happen.

But then she'd never dreamed of falling in love with him. God, he'd made her feel young again. It was a sensation she'd not experienced in quite some time. Young and beautiful was how he'd made her feel. Now she recognized his attentions for what they were. A rake dallying with the affections of an inexperienced old maid.

Had he laughed to himself at the way she'd responded to his lovemaking? From the beginning, he'd been forthright in claiming his rakish character. But she'd thought him honorable. She'd entered into this devil's bargain of her own accord, fully aware they'd eventually lead separate lives.

Still, there had been moments when she wondered if things might turn out differently for the two of them. Moments where she'd thought she'd seen a look of tenderness in his eyes or face. It wouldn't happen now. They'd part company, but it wouldn't be the quiet, unnoticed parting she'd envisioned.

Tonight's humiliation destroyed that possibility. The matter wouldn't remain private. Eleanor would see to that. The loathsome memory of seeing Eleanor in the ladies room tonight at the Alhambra returned vividly. Her sister's blithe announcement that it wouldn't be a fortnight before a woman would steal Devlyn away had been nothing more than a performance. It had been for the spectators in the ladies room.

The indiscreet whispers had only escalated after Eleanor's little scene. It was impossible to block out the voices expressing shocked outrage about the age difference between her and Devlyn. That people viewed her marriage as scandalous was one thing, now she'd be an object of pity as well. They'd see her as a spinster who'd thought to win the love of a younger man. What a fool. What a lovesick fool. She shivered again.

A soft sound outside her door froze her limbs. Her gaze darted to the main door, and she watched the knob turn slowly until it could go no further then it rolled back into place. Her heart rose in her throat as she waited for a heavy foot to break down the door. The silence stretched on, her nerves taut with trepidation.

When nothing happened, she sagged inward, her chin touching her chest as she realized he wasn't going to break down the door. Another tear forced its way out of her eyes that were squeezed shut. God help

her, she'd wanted him to break down the door. She'd wanted him to barrel his way in here and tell her it had all been a mistake. But that wasn't going to happen.

Drained and exhausted, she climbed to her feet. A quiet click behind her forced her to spin around toward the door that connected her room with Devlyn's. As the door opened, her body grew wooden and stiff.

His features implacable, Devlyn entered her room holding up a master key for the door lock in silence. For a long moment, he stared at her, his eyes never leaving her face. Uncomfortable under the penetrating stare, she turned away and watched the blaze burning in the fireplace. The silence between them was almost tangible and she grew tired of the tension it created.

"What do you want, my lord?"

"You."

She wasn't quite certain what she'd expected, but she hadn't expected this particular response. The bold arrogance of it amazed her. Did he really think he could make such a demand after what she'd seen in the library? Her gaze flew to his enigmatic expression. The misery he'd caused her welled up inside her in the form of steely anger.

"Always the rake, amusing and witty no matter what the occasion."

"It wasn't a jest, Sophie."

The fine line of her brow arched upward with disdain. "Then it should be, for I find it quite amusing."

"Damn it. I want to explain." No, he wanted to do more than explain. He wanted to tell her how much he loved her. He wanted to make her understand that there would never be another woman for him.

"Explain what, my lord? I have eyes, and I have no need of details." She forced a laugh past her lips.

"It's not what you think." Stepping forward, he drew up short as her hand snapped at the wrist to halt his forward momentum with her silent gesture.

"Spare me your explanations, my lord. Revenge brought us together, and we enjoyed a pleasant, but brief physical interlude. Now it's time to address the issue of leading separate lives."

"Pleasant interlude?" Bloody hell. He wanted to kill her. Brushing her hand aside, he moved within a foot of her. "You have the audacity to tell me that every moment of passion between us has been pleasant."

"Would you prefer I label our encounters as satisfactory?" A bitter smile twisted her lips.

"And perhaps you'd prefer me to show you how pleasant our little encounters have always been."

"You'd like that wouldn't you. Two sisters in one night. I'm surprised you aren't begging me to participate in a ménage a trois with you and the slut."

With a quick movement, he pulled her into his arms. "No, Sophie. I prefer my women one at a time so I have total control over their pleasure and mine."

"But I'm not your woman, my lord. I never will be."

"You're mine, Sophie. Shall I prove it?"

"Prove what? That you're stronger than I am? That you can bend my body to your will? Do as you wish. But know this. I despise you. I detest the sight of you. You aren't merely a rake; you're a callous, soulless wretch who isn't fit to touch me."

Each word had the strength of harsh blows pelting his body. God, she couldn't have hurt him more deeply than if she'd driven a stake through his heart. Couldn't she see how much he loved her?

"So you won't even allow me to explain," he rasped.

"Explain what? That revenge against my family included rutting with not only me, but my sister as well?"

"God damn it, Sophie! I was not rutting with your sister. I didn't even touch her."

She stared at him in amazement, speechless. He really expected her to believe him. Believe that he wasn't kissing Eleanor, when she'd seen the two of them together in a state of semi-undress. Suddenly, it occurred to her how amusing it all really was.

After all these years, he was still in love with Eleanor. How ironic, given her sister had stolen her fiancée. A small laugh escaped her. Then a flood of laughter parted her lips. In less than an instant, she was laughing hysterically at the entire situation.

His hands gripped her arms tightly and he shook her roughly. "That's enough. Enough, damn you."

Her laughter died at his furious expression. "You're quite right, my lord. Enough. Enough of this ludicrous conversation. I'll be out of the house tomorrow morning."

"The hell you will. You're my wife, and you'll stay here."

"No, my dear boy, I'm simply the woman you married." A brittle laugh escaped her lips. "You've been a wonderful tutor, but my bedroom education is complete now. You can hardly expect me not to put it to use. I'm sure there are more dissolute rakes in the Set willing to bed me."

"Take care with your words," he growled softly.

She ignored how his eyes were sunken in, his pallor almost white. His scar etched its way vividly down his face, while his mouth was nothing more than a thin, harsh line. He obviously didn't like being crossed. Well, this was one time the Devil of Devlyn's Keep would find his way thwarted.

"Surely you're not going to restrict me from using my education. With my detailed experience in the uses and abuses of a rake it shouldn't be difficult at all to acquire a lover."

"This is your last warning, Sophie."

"Or what? You'll cross the line and reveal yourself for the immoral, dissolute, odious bastard you really are? Forgive me, but I've already paid for and received those services. You performed exceedingly well given you're not much more than a callow youth."

His head jerked as her words lashed out through the air. For a fleeting instant, she believed he was going to hit her. Instead, he released her abruptly. With a sharp bow, he wheeled about and returned to his bedroom.

The door slammed shut behind him. She remained frozen in place for several moments, half expecting him to return, grateful, yet disappointed, when he didn't. Had she misjudged him? Throughout the conversation, he'd maintained his innocence. But there could be no denying what she'd seen. No, she'd not made a mistake. He'd been the one to err in thinking her a fool, willing to accept whatever nonsensical story he concocted.

Tomorrow she would have to visit Spencer and see if he would let her stay with him. She had no wish to remain under the same roof as Devlyn. It would be too painful. She closed her eyes. How was she going to live without him? They'd known each other only a short month, but it hadn't taken her that long to fall in love with him. Now, the depth of her love only intensified her pain and despair. Not even her father had ever cut her as deeply as Devlyn had tonight.

Exhausted, she undressed with lethargic movements before she eventually tumbled into bed. Sleep took its time coming to her, but when the little death overtook her, it was a welcome relief from the agony flowing out of her heart with every painful beat.

\* \* \* \*

The quiet rattle of china penetrated Sophie's sleep, and she stirred beneath her covers. Memories of the evening before washed over her. The heartache was still present, but it had numbed her. Sitting up in bed, her gaze settled on Emmie's worried features. A coil of dread tightened like a spring in her stomach. Something terrible had happened to Devlyn.

"What is it, Emmie?"

"My lady?" The girl shifted her gaze away from Sophie.

With nimble actions, Emmie poured a cup of chocolate and brought it to her with a white envelope. She accepted the cup and saucer, nodding for the girl to lay the envelope on the sheets in front of her. Sipping the hot beverage gingerly, she stared at the envelope. Emblazoned across the white parchment in Devlyn's bold, arrogant handwriting were the words Countess of Devlyn.

Was it a note of apology, humbly begging her forgiveness? No, Devlyn would never beg, and he would never ask for forgiveness. It must be a legal matter. Her heart twisted painfully in her breast. Fingers trembling with trepidation, she set aside her chocolate and reached for the envelope. Opening the letter, she perused the dark strokes across the paper.

Countess,

I neither invited nor wanted your sister to visit me last night. I finished with her long ago. When I arrived home last night, I drank myself into a stupor, for reasons I'll not discuss here. I awoke to what I thought was your sweet touch, only to find myself entrapped by your sister's twisted sense of amusement and revenge.

I have made arrangements to stay at the Marlborough club until we settle this matter between us. And settle it we will. I leave you in possession of Devlyn House until such time as you come to your senses with regard to my innocence.

Your husband,

Devlyn

The letter slid from Sophie's fingers. He believed her a fool. For she'd be nothing more than that to believe he'd been craving her touch when Eleanor awoke him. How could he maintain his innocence in the matter? She closed her eyes and forced herself to relive the memory of walking into the library last night.

The images were crisp and clear. Devlyn had been reclined in his favorite reading chair with Eleanor on her knees in front of him. Her sister had appeared somewhat disheveled, but not as badly as one might expect for a woman engaged in a romantic encounter.

Devlyn's appearance had been tousled as well, but upon reflection, he'd not presented the appearance of a man in the throes of passion. She'd memorized the way his scar would tighten and whiten when he was excited. If anything, he'd worn an expression of bewilderment as he pushed Eleanor away from him when he'd seen her standing in the doorway.

She furrowed her brow as she tried to remember his expression at that precise moment. Another emotion had darkened his face besides confusion. It had been a look of pained helplessness. Almost as if he'd lost a treasured item and realized there was little he could do to find it again. It had been a look of intense vulnerability.

Frowning, she scoffed at her nonsensical imaginings. His words were merely trying to trick her into believing his outrageous story. Her fingers caught up his note and crumpled it in a furious noise of anger. No. She refused to let his words sway her. He was a rake.

The behavior of a rake was rarely innocuous. Their protests of innocence were simply a means of achieving another goal. But what goal? What did Devlyn hope to achieve by maintaining his innocence? Whatever it was, she refused to help him accomplish it.

## Chapter 11

Leaning against a pillar in the Manchester ballroom, Devlyn watched with increasing fury as one more



male swelled the ranks surrounding his wife. For the past two weeks, she'd been quietly attracting the attention of numerous admirers. On the rare occasion when she'd recognized his presence, Sophie's manner was cold and distant.

Her anger was understandable given the way Eleanor had set out to destroy them both, but why did she persist in this ridiculous standoff? He was doing everything possible to prove he was innocent of any wrongdoing. More than a week and a half ago, he'd seen Eleanor at the Beresford soiree. His deliberate cut had been brutal to the point of humiliating the woman.

The gossip over the entire incident had raced through the Marlborough Set with the speed of hounds at the hunt, and Eleanor had removed herself from London the next day. It had been at that point he'd been certain Sophie would come to believe in his innocence. But she'd ignored his letters and turned from him whenever they met in public.

"Devlyn." The sound of Spencer Hamilton's voice made him turn his head. "Do you mind telling me what the hell is going on here?"

"Nice to see you too, Hamilton."

"Damn it, Devlyn. What the hell is going on?"

"If I knew what you were babbling about, perhaps I could oblige you."

"I went to Portsmouth on business a couple of weeks ago, and when I returned today, I find the Set exploding with gossip about you and Phe."

"There's always been gossip about us."

His gaze returned to where his wife stood. It hadn't taken Sir Archibald any time at all to force himself into Sophie's little sphere. Folding his arms across his chest, Devlyn glared at the group paying court to his wife. Bloody hell, she was actually laughing at something Sir Archibald had said.

"And is this gossip true?"

"Gossip is never true."

"Damn it, Devlyn. I overheard a conversation that Phe was going to ask you for a divorce."

He jerked his head around to scowl at his brother-in-law. "I won't give her one. I'm not about to part with her."

"Why not?"

With a snort of disgust, he turned his attention back to Sophie. "Because what's mine, I keep."

"Are you sure there's not another reason?"

"What other reason could there be?"

"You're in love with her."

Stiffening, he remained silent. He wasn't in the mood for games, especially where Sophie was concerned. Hamilton leaned toward him.

"She's in love with you, you know." His brother-in-law's words were confident, but it was the confidence in the younger man's face that made the words all the more powerful.

"How the hell do you know that?"

"Because I've seen the way she looks at you."

"Then you're mistaken. Sophie despises me."

"No, I'm not mistaken. Whatever happened between the two of you must have hurt her deeply to drive this wedge between you."

"I have one word for that wedge. Eleanor."

"What does Eleanor have to do with this?"

"The woman deliberately put me in a compromising situation solely for the purpose of convincing Sophie that I'd betrayed her."

"Sweet Jesus." Hamilton blew out a breath of fury. "What the hell did she do that for?"

"Because your father apparently instructed her to do so."

"The bloody bastard." His brother-in-law grimaced as he looked across the dance floor toward his sister. "And what about Phe?"

"She thinks I'm guilty. You can imagine how she might feel given it was Eleanor who stole Shively away from her."

"What are you doing to get her back?"

Devlyn sent his brother-in-law an arched look. "Doing?"

"Yes doing. What are your plans for convincing her that you're in love with her?"

"You expect me to tell Sophie I'm in love with her?" He stared at Hamilton convinced the man had lost his mind. Telling Sophie he was in love with her would give her the power to destroy him.

"Are you willing to watch her fall into another man's arms?"

"That will never happen."

"No? Take a close look, Devlyn. Those aren't just ordinary men surrounding my sister. They're some of London's wealthiest men, who would think nothing of making Sophie their mistress."

"Damn you, Hamilton," he snarled. "If you think I've not already considered that, you're a fool. Why the hell do you think I'm dogging Sophie's heels? Wherever she goes, I go."

"But will it be enough? How are you going to convince her you're in love with her?"

"I thought cutting Eleanor would ease her anger, make her see I'm innocent. You can see how well that worked. Hell, I've even disposed of the ledgers. Gave them to the local authorities yesterday."

"Ledgers? What ledgers?"

"I'm sorry to say it, Hamilton, but your father's a thief. My brilliant, stubborn wife had been keeping two sets of books of your father's finances. It's why she came to me. She offered me her set of books as a means to destroy him in exchange for my marrying her."

"Good God! I never realized... She never talked about Father's affairs." Stunned disbelief whitened his brother-in-law's face. Devlyn immediately regretted mentioning the nasty business. Hamilton gathered himself and shook his head.

"Have you told her what you did with the books?"

"No." He turned back to study the ballroom, his gaze finding Sophie waltzing around the room in the arms of Sir Archibald. Bloody hell, he was going to choke the man for even looking at her.

"Well, if she doesn't know what you've done with the books, then she's not likely to comprehend your

change of heart."

"What the hell do the account ledgers have to do with my love for Sophie?"

"You might love your wife, Devlyn, but you've a lot to learn about how my sister thinks. If she believes you still have those books, that's like saying your revenge is more important than she is."

His jaw tightened as Hamilton's words sank in his brain. The man was right. Sophie would see his humiliating snub of Eleanor as little more than a falsehood. She'd think it was his way of appeasing her. The question was how could he get her alone to explain everything?

"I see you understand your dilemma. Might I make a suggestion where my sister is concerned?" Hamilton paused as Devlyn gave a sharp nod for him to proceed. "Phe invited me to join her at the opera tomorrow night--"

"Bloody hell, she knows I hate the opera."

"Precisely. She indicated in her note that it's the one place she's certain you won't haunt her."

"So she's not completely immune to my presence." Relief sped through him at the knowledge. Could Hamilton be right? Could Sophie actually be in love with him? The idea bolstered his spirits immensely. The sound of his brother-in-law speaking interrupted his thoughts.

"What did you say?"

Hamilton shook his head with amused annoyance. "I said you can use Revelstoke's box at the opera. He's in the country, and he told me to use it whenever I like. His box is directly across from yours. When you see me leave, you'll be free to join Phe."

"If she even lets me into the box."

"When I get done talking to her, I'm certain she won't protest your arrival. Are we agreed?"

"Agreed." Devlyn shook his brother-in-law's hand. Soon he'd have the opportunity to explain everything. And afterward, he'd make sure his lovely wife never thought to live apart from him again.

\* \* \* \*

Seated in the Revelstoke opera box, Devlyn waited impatiently for Sophie to appear in the private space across from where he sat. The crowd in the vestibule had been more crowded than he cared for, and he'd decided to take his seat early. The theater was already almost completely full, and still there was no sign of Sophie or her brother.

Irritation seethed just below the surface as he watched the crowd finding their seats. The minutes stretched on, and the orchestra began to warm up their instruments. A moment later, he saw Sophie enter their theater box followed by Hamilton. The relief he experienced was almost palpable.

His gaze slid over her face. She was more beautiful than he'd ever seen her. Her skin glowed and her mouth looked ripe, succulent. The gown she wore was a lush green, almost the color of grass in the springtime.

It molded and highlighted her curves. Curves he knew all too well and wanted to worship again with his mouth and tongue. His cock stirred to life at the image. How he'd missed her. When she was back in his arms, he was taking her home to the keep. Away from all these admirers of hers. He would take his time telling her, showing her, how much he loved her.

Relief was a short-lived experience as he observed Sir Archibald entering the box. His jaw tightened with fury as the man bent over Sophie's hand before taking up a seat next to her. Tonight was the last time Sir Archibald would ever get near his wife again. That was if he didn't kill the bastard first.

His brother-in-law had taken the seat on the other side of Sophie and he leaned forward to say something. He grimaced as Sophie shook her head firmly, causing her brother to frown. The sight of Hamilton's determined expression gave him hope as he watched the man lean toward Sophie again.

It was obvious from his wife's glare that she was far from receptive to Hamilton's words. It was not going well. Not well at all. Damn the woman, was he going to have to kidnap her and hold her prisoner until she believed him innocent?

Sophie flipped her fan open to stir the air in front of her at a languid pace. Unshakeable in his resolve, Hamilton spoke something in her ear. She immediately stiffened, her fan falling into her lap as she turned to stare at her brother. An expression of satisfaction settled on his brother-in-law's face and Sophie appeared confused. Adorably so.

She shook her head slightly, and he watched Hamilton lean forward to speak again before turning in the direction of the Revelstoke theater box. The orchestra struck up the overture as the lights in the opera house dimmed.

Light from the stage illuminated Sophie's bewildered expression and he watched her slowly turn to look in his direction. His eyes locked with hers, and he stared at her with all the intensity of his being. He

could see her wavering, uncertain as to whether she should look away. God, even now, when she might not want him, he still loved her.

It was tangible, this emotion that engulfed him. It made him want to caress her with his hands, but all he could do was to make love to her in his head as he stared into her face from across the chasm of the opera house.

He visualized running his fingers across her skin in a light caress. She'd quiver in that unique way of hers that told him how much his touch was affecting her. It would make her breathing a little erratic. There would be that rapid beat of her pulse fluttering wildly on the side of her neck. Sophie's hand flew to her neck, to the exact spot he was picturing in his head.

Despite the dim light, he saw her mouth part slightly so her tongue could dart out to wet her lips. A low growl reverberated out of him. God, every time she did that he wanted to devour her. Did she have any idea what type of effect that had on him? Her hand came to rest against her skin just above the décolletage of her gown.

Was she imagining his lips against those soft swells? It was torment to be so close to those beautiful nipples and still unable to suckle at them in the manner that made her plead with him so sweetly. Her hand skimmed discreetly over one breast and a surge of triumph sailed through him, tightening his cock until it was hot and hard.

Excited and aroused. It was the only way to describe the sensations cascading over her. They flooded her senses, making it impossible to think straight. Spencer's words had been confusing enough, but to see Devlyn sitting across from her was unbelievable. He despised the opera, but he'd come here willing to sit through it for her. In a way, he was sacrificing himself for her. How could she ignore such a gesture?

She tried to look away from his bold stare, but found it impossible to do so. His eyes were caressing her as if they were his hands. She licked her dry lips. She didn't know what to do. The memory of her sister kissing him was so strong, so powerful. He'd steadfastly proclaimed his innocence, and he'd cut Eleanor in a fashion that was brutal even for him. But was she ready to believe him? To believe what Spencer had told her about the ledgers?

The intensity of Devlyn's stare made it a struggle to breathe normally. Even with his eyes, he could make love to her. Oh, God, her nipples were taut and they ached with that delicious pang only he could stir in her. She slid her hand downward, her fingers barely touching her hardened nipple as she laid her hand in her lap. It was enough to spread the ache down into her nether region.

It was as if his hand was sliding down her waist then across her thigh to touch her intimately. Heat swirled in her belly and rushed downward at the image of his fingers sliding into her, stroking her. She

bit her lip as a rush of liquid heat flowed from her.

His expression darkened and she wanted to melt beneath his hot gaze. He knew. Somehow, he knew she was wet and ready for him. Her breasts swelled and grew heavy with desire. His eyelids drooped slightly, just the way they did when they were making love. Oh God, she wanted him. She wanted him inside her now.

Beside her, Sir Archibald leaned close and touched her hand. Uncaring of how it might look, she brushed his hand away. Heat flowed through her and she fanned herself furiously. She had to leave, catch her breath somehow. Snapping her fan closed, she jerked her gaze away from Devlyn's and jumped to her feet.

When she stood, both Sir Archibald and Spencer rose to their feet. She shook her head at both of them and offered a brief excuse before she hurried out of the box and into the corridor. She needed air. Fresh air. The carpet muffled the sound of her shoes as she ran down the hall. As she turned the corner to enter the second floor vestibule, she came to a halt. Devlyn stood before her. He'd followed her. The passion in his gaze had not diminished and she sucked in a sharp breath at the sight of him.

He'd never looked more handsome or masterful than he did at this moment. Sweet Lord, if only they were home. In the privacy of their own bedroom. His eyes conveyed the same urgency rushing through her. Without a word, he stepped forward and grasped her wrist to hurry her down the stairs. Together they bolted through the front door of the opera house, ignoring the surprised looks of staff.

The cool air brushed over her heated skin, but it didn't dim her ardor. Still he didn't speak, but his expression told her everything. His craving for her was as great as hers was for him. With a gentle tug, he pulled her along the street until they encountered a dark alley.

Darkness enveloped them and his mouth was on hers. The exquisite heat of his lips against hers shot through her and into her blood. God help her, she wanted more. She refused to think, only to feel. There was only this moment in time and her need for him. His mouth left hers to nibble on her ear and then at the side of her neck.

A soft moan escaped her as he trailed his fingers across the tops of her breasts. He followed the hot path with his mouth. When his tongue slid into the valley between her breasts, her fingers entwined themselves in his dark silky hair. She wanted more. She wanted to feel his hand on her. She wanted her hands on him.

Her hands slid across the crisp white linen of his shirt, then his waistcoat and down to his waist. Trembling now with a wild need that could only be assuaged by his possession, her fingers found his rock hard length pressing through the expensive material of his trousers. She had believed once that she would never beg anyone for anything ever again. But now she was beyond pride. She needed him. Needed him now.

"Devlyn, please."

Pulling back from her slightly, he stared into her eyes. The passion glowing there singed her, making her burn with need. She threw caution to the wind. Nothing mattered except the love burning inside her, craving his touch.

"I need you," she whispered with desperation.

"I know."

"For the love of God, Devlyn, please." Her hands captured the sides of his face and pulled his mouth down to hers. Just before she kissed him, she murmured, "I want your cock inside me now."

He stiffened against her as she sought his lips. For a moment, she thought she'd shocked him. Then his mouth was plundering hers with a frenzied passion that took her by surprise. It was glorious.

Damn, she tasted good. He'd almost spilled his seed when she'd whispered her need for him. Whenever she used that low, throaty voice in such a lusty fashion, it undid him. She rubbed her hips against his. Hell, she wasn't just ready for him; she was on fire. He didn't have to touch that swollen nub of hers to know she'd cream all over his cock the moment he entered her.

With a quick movement, he guided her backward until she was pressed against the brick wall of the building. His hand gathered a handful of material and lifted one side of her dress. He intended to bind her to him forever. Never again, would there be any doubt in her mind how much he loved her.

His hand grazed the top of her thigh and she jumped at his touch. The touch of her hand against his hardness tugged a groan from him. He had to have her. He needed to embed himself inside her. Quickly, he freed his cock from its restraints and cleared a path through her petticoats.

"Wrap your leg around my waist, my sweet."

The moment she did so, he plunged into her. Sweet Jesus, she was tight. It was incredible the way her snug passage clung to him, rippled over him. She convulsed around him with a torturous pleasure he had only ever experienced with her. Christ, he was about to explode. Without thought, he plunged into her again and again as she whimpered with increasing pleasure.

He could feel the power of his desire flooding through him, and at that moment, she peaked. Her hot, tight passage clenched at him with intense spasms, and his cock throbbed in that ultimate release as he spilled his seed into her.

A small cry parted her lips, and he buried it beneath his mouth as they shuddered in each other's arms.



For a long moment, he stayed buried inside her. He didn't want to move, but he wanted to lay against her with nothing between them. They needed to go home.

Warmth seeped through him as he slid out of her, allowing her dress to fall back into place. Quickly he adjusted his clothing and stared at his wife. Her eyes were closed. There was a sated expression on her face, her mouth curled in a slight smile of delight.

"I love you, Sophie."

Her eyes flew open and she simply stared at him. The pounding of his heart filled his ears as he waited for her to answer. When she didn't, he frowned. Christ, he'd just given her the power to destroy him.

"When a man speaks of love, he usually expects a response."

She nodded her head in a dazed fashion. "I know. I just don't have one at the moment."

"What the hell do you mean you don't have an answer?" He took a step back from her and watched as she bit her lip. Damnation, he was ready to strangle her. He'd just bared his soul to her, and she couldn't respond in kind? She sent him a helpless look, and he expelled a loud noise of anger.

Grasping her wrist, he pulled her toward the end of the alley. They were going home, and he was going to make love to her until she said the words he needed to hear. There would be no more games.

"Where are we going?"

"Home. I'm going to make love to you until you tell me what I want to hear."

"Don't be ridiculous, Devlyn. You can't force people to say what you want them to say."

"Watch me."

He sent her a cold glare as he signaled for the carriage. When it rolled to a halt in front of them, he helped her inside, then entered the vehicle and closed the door behind him. Seated across from him, she realized he had every intention of pleasuring her until she spoke her heart.

There was no doubt she loved him, but while seeing Eleanor with him had been heartbreaking, she knew the issue went deeper than that for her.

In twenty years, he would still be in his prime, but her youth as well as her prime years would be well behind her. How could she ask him to choose such a lifestyle? How could she ask it of herself? The thought of him tied to her, wanting a more youthful wife, knowing that she might have to let him go in

the future. She didn't want that, couldn't countenance that. The only thing to do would be to let him go.

While she believed him about Eleanor, what would she do when another woman, younger and prettier than her tried to come between them? What would she do then? No, far better to break the ties now than suffer heartache of the deepest kind in the future. What she'd experienced over the past two weeks would be a pittance compared to the painful price she'd pay later if she allowed this relationship to continue. She couldn't do it.

"Quentin." It was the first time she'd ever used his Christian name, and his eyes narrowed as he met her direct gaze. "Even if I tell you what you want to hear, it won't change anything. The age difference is too great. It's highly doubtful I'll ever bear you a child, and I could never accept you keeping a mistress once you tire of me. It's best that we part company now and go about our individual lives."

"Are you quite finished?" There was a dangerous edge to his voice.

"I don't know what else there is to say."

"Well I have a few things to say, and you're damn well going to listen to them without a word of interruption. Is that understood?"

He waited for her nod of agreement. Satisfied, he eyed her carefully. He could tell she was afraid. She was afraid of the risk involved in loving him. For he was certain now that she loved him, she was simply too frightened to admit it. But by God, before the night was done, she'd declare her love, and he'd see to it there was no more talk about leading separate lives.

"First I want to hear you say what I've already said." She stared at him in surprise for a moment before she glanced away. He refused to let her avoid the task. "Say it, Sophie."

"I love you." She snapped the words at him, the fear poignant in her voice.

"Say it again."

"For God's sake, Quentin. Why are you doing this?"

"Say it."

"I love you." A tear trickled down her cheek.

"And I love you. That's all that matters, nothing else."

"Will you be reasonable?"

"I'm being quite reasonable, Sophie. We love each other, and I'll be damned if I let you toss that away. You're right, we might not be youthful lovers, but by God, I don't want any other woman in my bed but you. We're not old yet, but I want to grow old with you. And while I'd be proud and delighted if you bore me an heir, it doesn't matter to me if that never happens. I'm not giving you up. Not for money, not for an heir, not for age, not for anything."

He inhaled a deep breath, his gaze pinned on her face. Her expression displayed her indecision, and he pushed the point.

"I learned something these past two weeks. Without you, I'm nothing. I need you in my life to make me whole, to make my life worth living."

Tears were streaming down her face now, and she shook her head. "I don't know. What if you--"

"Don't ask questions, don't think. Love me and let me love you."

She stared at him for a long moment, and he held his breath. Had he won? An instant later, she threw herself across the carriage into his arms. Her hands cupped his face as she kissed him with fervent desperation. He pulled her onto his lap, holding her close.

"A wise decision, my love."

"I never stood a chance against you." She laughed and sobbed at the same time.

"Why would you? I knew we were meant for each other the first time I kissed you in Devlyn's Keep."

"Oh, you did, did you?" She pushed away from him and gave him a playful punch in the shoulder as the carriage rolled to a halt.

The door opened and he unceremoniously dumped her on to the carriage seat. Exiting the vehicle, he turned toward her as she stepped down onto the narrow step of the vehicle. With a quick movement, he swept her out of the carriage into his arms.

To the amusement of the coachman, footman and Fischer who'd opened the townhouse door, he kissed her long and hard.

"That, Countess, is just a taste of what to expect now and for the rest of our lives."

"I love you, Quentin."

"And I you," he murmured, his green eyes flashing with emotion. "Now I suggest we retire for the night

and you show me just how much you love me."

With that, he carried her up the townhouse steps determined to make her happy until the end of their days.

## Epilogue

Devlyn paced the hall corridor as another scream of pain echoed out of Sophie's bedchamber. Damn it, this waiting was the most excruciating thing he'd ever done in his life. The door opened and Mrs. Michaels, the housekeeper Sophie had hired several months ago, came out of the room with a basin and wet towels. Glaring at the woman, he blocked her path.

"Well?"

"She's having a rough go of it, my lord. It's hard to say."

Another scream ripped its way out into the hall. The sound of it chilled his skin with fear. To hell with propriety. The woman he loved was in pain, and he'd be damned if anyone was going to keep him from her.

Skirting the woman in his way, he threw open the door to his wife's room and strode toward the bed. The alarmed protests of the doctor and midwife rose over his head, but he ignored them as he approached Sophie's side. She was pale, and her usually lustrous hair was now damp with sweat. Still, she was the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen.

Her eyes were closed, but as he sat on the bed beside her, she slowly opened them. A brilliant light of happiness lit her from within as he grasped her hand. Leaning forward, he kissed her forehead.

"I think it's high time you delivered our daughter, Sophie."

Her chuckle was weak as she gave a slight shake of her head. "It's not as easy as that, my love."

"Isn't it? If you can tame the Devil of Devlyn's Keep, then you are more than capable of providing young Spencer with a baby sister."

Her eyes closed as another pain rippled through her body, and her hand gripped his with the strength of vise. On the other side of the bed, the doctor leaned toward her.

"Please, my lady. You must push."

"I can't. I simply can't. I'm so tired." Sophie shook her head wearily.

The worried frown on the doctor's face sent another chill through him. He wasn't about to lose his wife to a child. Turning his head back to her, he scowled at the expression of tired defeat on her face. She could rest later, now wasn't the time to quit.

"So that's it. You're giving up." Her eyes fluttered open to stare up at him in surprise. "And I suppose you think I'll raise this child and Spencer on my own?"

"Quentin, you know--"

"No, Sophie, I don't know how to be a mother to our children, which means I'll be forced to marry again."

Her eyes flashed with anger before another cry of pain broke past her lips. Seeing her hurting twisted his gut, but he refused to give in to the desire to console her. She needed to fight if she and the babe were to live. The pain eased and she glared up at him.

"And who would have you as their husband? Your reputation for debauchery still stands."

"Perhaps that young Miss Wilson you invited to dinner a few months ago. I understand her father's seeking a title for the girl."

"You'd grow--" She gasped as another pain twisted through her and she strained to push. "Tired of her in less than a month."

"Then Lady Overton. Widows always possess experience."

Gasping for breath, Sophie scowled at him in fury. "You're doing this on purpose."

"What? Rattling off a list of possibilities to replace you?"

"Ye-yes!"

"So who do you suggest?"

"No ... one. I'm the only woman who'll ... tolerate ... you."

Her body writhed on the bed as another pain ripped through her. Fear struck at the very heart of him.  
"Well, then push, damn you! Push, Sophie."

With a cry of anger, she lurched upright, her fingernails biting painfully into the palm of his hand. The strain of her efforts was telling on her face and neck, and for a moment he was certain he'd lose her simply from the ferocity of her attempt. Then with a loud cry, she strained once more before an expression of release crossed her exhausted features and she collapsed against her pillows.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the doctor bring their second child into the world. A loud smack echoed in the room, and the baby's angry cry filled the bedchamber. The man beamed at him broadly.

"You've a daughter, my lord. A strong, healthy looking daughter."

Shoulders sagging, he leaned forward and rested his forehead against Sophie's shoulder. Tender fingers drifted across the thinly lined scar on his cheek.

"You, my lord, are a brute," she whispered.

He lifted his head to stare down into her hazel eyes. They glowed with love and a tired happiness that sent a bolt of relief through him. "What would you have me do? Lose you?"

"But Lady Overton?"

"I saw no need to eliminate her as a potential replacement. She's quite lovely to look at." Mischief twisted his lips in a small smile.

"You know full well, she's an empty-headed twit."

"Then it's most fortunate my wife decided to survive the birth of our child." His statement made her brush her fingers across his lips. To anyone else the words might have sounded flippant, but she heard the relief beneath the cavalier response.

"Thank you, my love. You always know exactly what to do. I don't know how I existed before that day I entered your study."

"I adore you, Sophie."

His words were so low she barely heard them, but the depth of his love for her gleamed brightly in his green eyes. She sighed softly as his hand captured hers and his mouth caressed the inside of her wrist. Happiness flooded through her at his touch and she bit back the tears of joy threatening to overwhelm her. His eyes met hers, and he smiled.

"Come, my lady, I think it's time you met your daughter."

Rising from the bed, he accepted his daughter from the doctor and carried the child back to her. When he laid the precious bundle in Sophie's arms, he sat beside her his arm around her shoulders. She smiled as the baby yawned and gripped her finger tightly in a small fist. With her husband's arm holding her close, Sophie welcomed the sensation of warmth and security his body gave her.

"So are we to name her Emily?"

"Yes." She chuckled. "I seem to recall that's the name you picked out."

"You know full well, Countess, that if you'd desired a different name, you would have succeeded in changing my mind." The twinkle in his eye made her smile. She looked down at the babe in her arms.

"She looks like you, Quentin. But time will tell if she takes up your rakish behavior." She smiled up at him, a laugh parting her lips at his askance look.

"She will toe the line as her mother does." His teasing remark pulled another soft laugh from her.

"If you believe that, then you're doomed to be wrapped around the child's finger."

"If she does wrap me around her finger, it will simply be love's revenge."

Puzzled, she frowned. "Love's revenge?"

"A need for revenge brought us together, my love. But instead, love turned us toward each other. Spencer and Emily are evidence of love's revenge on us."

Looking up at him, she saw his love shining down on her, and she sighed softly. He was right as usual. Love had taken its revenge on them by bringing them together and binding their hearts as one. No matter what else happened in the course of their lives, she would always be grateful for love's revenge.