



# A DEVIL'S PROPOSAL

BY

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## Chapter One

*London, 1811*

Ransom, the Earl of Leahaven, sighed as he leaned on the railing and stared down at the crowd below, twirling to the music of the orchestra. Yet another mundane ball in another mundane Season. He turned his head and observed the equally bored expressions on the faces of his two friends.

"I say, would you think it badly done of us if we were to take our leave?" he asked.

Simon, the Earl of Carlyle, passed him a horrified glance, his green eyes darkened in censure, a frown marking his brow. "We shall not be doing that. I hardly relish the idea of standing under my sister's ever-present fury while you fellows run off and leave her to ring a fine peal over me."

Chuckling at the image, Ransom pushed off the smooth mahogany railing and tilted forward to gain a better look of Anterton, who stood in a quiet repose. "What say you?"

Cool blue eyes snapped to attention, and the Marquis' lips pursed together in irritation. "What?"

Not at all offended by his friend's abrupt manner, he grinned. "Should we leave him to face his sister alone?"

Anterton frowned, and cast a glance at Carlyle. "What for?"

Ransom leaned back on the balustrade with his elbow and sighed. "For the fun of it."

"Bored?"

Leahaven's attention focused on Anterton as he attempted to stay the scowl at the Marquis's matter-of-fact question. "Of course." His lips tilted in a wry grin. "It's all the same, isn't it? We come, we dance, and we have a rousing good time."

Carlyle elbowed him in the side. "This is my sister's Season, and I'm holding you to your promise to attend."

Rolling his eyes, he sighed and wished he hadn't been so quick to agree. "I am well aware of that fact. It's just deuced boring dancing with all those fresh-faced gels and simpering debutantes."

Anterton leaned forward over the railing. "You are not the only one suffering. Five ladies have swooned before me tonight."

"That's because you're bracket-faced," he said, sliding in a jibe he couldn't quite resist.

Anterton nodded at the ribbing, taking it as his due. A chuckle at the obvious joke revealed his lighthearted humor toward his notorious attractiveness. Ransom wasn't jealous of his friend's good looks, far from it. Of the three of them, Anterton was whispered about the most by women young and old because of his handsomeness. He had cold-as-ice eyes and russet hair that curled just so, combined with a perfectly

symmetrical cleft in his chin. His cut features made him look as though he belonged in a pantheon and not London Town. The man couldn't walk into a room without being noted.

Ransom released another soft laugh. Indeed, none of them could go anywhere without creating a hum of speculation. The Devil's Trio they were called, and aptly so.

"So what do you propose we do? We promised Carlyle here to stand by him," Anterton pointed out, nudging his famous chin in his friend's direction.

"I'm standing here, you know," Carlyle stated, with an indignant scowl.

"We know, bright eyes," Ransom announced, producing a deeper frown from Simon.

"I told you not to call me that," he growled, his green eyes lightening to an almost gold fury.

"Come now," Ransom said, chuckling. "Bat those lashes for me."

"You better watch yourself. I'm likely to draw your cork at the rate you're going," Carlyle said.

Ransom said, "It's all in good fun."

Carlyle glared at him. "Well, keep your forked tongue to yourself."

Recoiling at his words, Leahaven relented and fell into a somber quietude as remorse came over him. His wit could turn a woman's head or cut a man down. His silver tongue had proved both a gift and a curse. On many occasions he'd offended some fellow and been forced to settle matters in the most barbaric form.

A bubble of heated emotion rose up, long repressed and urging him to release it, but he resisted. It surged in one final effort then ebbed into nothingness once more and he was able to continue, the drones of varying conversations coming to the forefront.

Anterton stared at him with a piercing look. "Something amiss?"

"It's just so damnably boring," he groaned.

"Are you after a challenge?"

Ransom cast his attention on Anterton, who dropped his hands on the balustrade to stare at the crowd below. Turning, he rested his elbows on the railing and threw his glance over the silk skirts below in an attempt to discover what had caught the Marquis's eye.

"What do you propose?"

Anterton nudged his head toward the right area of the room. "Lady Winifred."

His gaze shot over to the furthestmost corner where he found his *challenge* standing. The Marquis of Samford's very plump daughter. Indeed, she had a handsome face, a button nose, round cheeks and soft chin. In fact, the only thing at all breathtaking about her had to be her strawberry blonde curls. An unusual color. At that moment, her aquamarine eyes traveled over the crowd in boredom while she fanned herself, a small frown of irritation marking her brow.

"What's the challenge there?"

"I propose you won't be able to sway her to marry you, even with that golden tongue of yours."

"You don't think? That gel begs to be seduced," Ransom scoffed. "And besides, it seems hardly fair for you to set the parson's mousetrap for me."

Anterton rose a brow. "I doubt that is likely to happen."

"How so?"

“Her father would hardly approve your suit. He is known to be quite strict with his daughter, wants her to marry no less than a duke. And with your not quite pristine background and financial woes, you won’t get within five feet of her.”

With the gauntlet laid down, Ransom found he couldn’t resist. He adjusted his jacket with sharp jerks and stared over the crowd, a speculative eye on his challenge. “I beg to differ. I’ll have a yea out of her by the end of this week.”

“Tar an’ hounds! Are you fellows dicked in the nob! That is going too far,” Carlyle warned.

Eying his friend, Ransom chuckled with self-confidence. “How so?”

“You could be brought down by a breach of promise, you know,” Carlyle said.

Ransom sobered at the thought. He didn’t have the blunt to pay financial compensation. His brows drew together in concentration, then cleared with a lopsided grin. “I won’t approach the father. We are after a yea from her. It’s doubtful that anyone would believe I made an offer.”

Carlyle only shook his head in response.

Ignoring his friend’s disapproval, he turned to Anterton. “Very well, I accept your challenge.”

\* \* \* \*

Winifred perused the crowd of dancing couples, a stab of disappointment slicing through her. Her first Season and she had yet to have an impact on any gentleman. She couldn’t quite recall why she thought the Season would be a fantastic adventure. The pressure to marry and marry well weighed on her and vanquished any joy she might have experienced in the London twirl.

She bit into the almond biscuit and chewed with a pensive frown on her brow. Her father demanded she capture the attention of a duke, but she thought it highly improbable that she could achieve that. She had yet to attract *any* interest from a suitable peer. She did have to avoid the occasional interest of fortune hunters. But they were quick to disappear the moment she mentioned that her father would disinherit her, should she marry without his approval. Then she would never see hide or hair of them again.

Not a flattering reaction, but it saved her from a disillusioned marriage. She had yet to garner the attention of a man with any interest in her beyond her inheritance.

Despite the fact that Lady Montrose’s ball had been rumored to be the event of the Season, she couldn’t help but feel disappointed. Nothing piqued her interest here, and she could do little to stay the boredom that ate away at her composure. Truly, she didn’t know how long she could remain thus and watch time after time as another tittering debutante was asked to dance. Popping the remainder of the biscuit in her mouth, she brushed at the stubborn crumbs that hung onto her clothes before she turned her attention to the decor.

The room’s pale wash of blue with white architraves gave a vaguely Romanesque feeling. Breathtaking chandeliers illuminated the room; hundreds of candles radiated their light across the walls and people.

She tapped her foot, contemplating her next move. Her stomach contracted, a painful reminder she had yet to have dinner. It would do her well to have something substantial, rather than wait for the slim chance that she *might* be asked to dance. Exiting the room, she made her way to the refreshments table. With a plate in hand, she cast her consideration over the fare; her eyes ran over the cool meats and sweet puddings.

From the corner of her vision, she could see another gentleman moving to fill his plate with food. But she paid him no notice as she finished choosing a collection of wondrous meat and delectable sweets, then made her way to the nearest vacant table.

With her skirts arranged about her, she placed the dish on the small table and cut into the meat, then took a bite and chewed, relishing the taste. Her regard moved casually over the couples that promenaded by in the next room.

She wondered what kept her from leaving this *soirée* early and taking herself home. Her lips tilted in a wry grin. Her mother would be furious once she discovered her daughter missing. The likelihood of that didn't frighten her. She would hear an earful once her mother arrived home, but that wouldn't occur for hours. It was her mother's usual habit to desert her for a game of loo. Winifred always managed to fend for herself.

A gentleman stepped in her line of vision, intruding on her inner reflections. She forced herself to look up, over a plate of food, a black jacket, a golden vest and into his face. Sapphire eyes looked down at her, a lock of black hair resting just over a dark eyebrow.

"Pray, Lady Winifred. May I introduce you to a friend of mine?" She turned her head to observe Lord Anterton, who stood next to this attractive gentleman.

Winifred remained stunned, not only because she had been through a formal introduction several nights ago with him, but also that the Marquis chose to seek her out. Indeed, the last time she'd been with him, he seemed quite uncomfortable around her.

"Of--of course, my lord," she murmured.

"It's my distinct pleasure to introduce you to the Earl of Leahaven. Lady Winifred."

"Charmed," the Earl said, as he lifted her gloved hand and brushing an airy kiss over it.

"May I sit?"

She nodded her head in a daze, Lord Anterton forgotten as the Earl gifted her with a soft smile and seated himself.

Her heart thumped against her ribcage as he turned in his seat and his knee brushed up against her skirt. "Sorry," he apologized. "But it's deuced crowded in here."

She agreed with him but she dared not say a word. They sat in silence for a moment, and she found her appetite had abandoned her. Very much aware of the gentleman's gaze on her, she moved the food around on her plate with her fork.

She watched him eat for a while before he turned his head toward her and tilted his head, a lopsided grin on his lips robbing her of thought. "Not hungry?"

She looked down at her as yet untouched food, then glanced at him, heat suffusing her face. "I thought I might have been."

Eyes crinkled as his smile widened. "Perhaps a turn around the terrace would be preferable?"

Gasping at his offer, she dared a quick glance at Lord Anterton, only to find him absent. Trepidation filled her.

She'd been left alone with him!

Composing herself, she faced him once more, his amused expression adding to her mortification. "Where is Lord Anterton?"

He threw his attention over the crowd. "I believe he thought it best to leave us to

a more ... *personal* conversation.”

She felt she would swoon. Scandalous! “But I don’t even know you,” she whispered, fearful they would be overheard. “We have only just been introduced.”

“Pardon my manners. What details do you wish for?”

Winifred’s eyes widened in dismay. “I know *enough* about you.”

“So you know who I am.” He sighed with disappointment.

“Everyone knows The Devil’s Trio.”

A lopsided grin formed with a mischievous gleam in his eye. “Are you appropriately scandalized?”

“Certainly not,” she huffed. She wouldn’t dare admit to that!

He chuckled as he leaned back in his seat, a dubious cock of his eyebrow proving that he *knew* she was scandalized. Very much so.

“My lord, I shall have you know right now that my father would not approve, should you intend to pursue me.”

“Would he not?” he asked. His tone indicated he neither knew nor cared and was perhaps amused by it.

“Yes. On threat of disinheritance.”

“Still care for that turn around the terrace?”

She drew back in surprise, but could appreciate his tenacity. “My lord, it would be most improper for us to do so without a chaperone.”

Casting a quick scan about the room, he turned to her once more. “My dear, I have yet to even *see* you with a chaperone.”

She regarded him as suspicion washed over her. “Have you been watching me, sir?”

“Indeed I have.”

Left speechless by his audacity, she blinked, uncertain of his motives and yet somehow thrilled.

Chuckling, he pushed to his feet and held his hand down to her. She stared at it for a moment, contemplating the repercussions should she accept. Standing by the wall for several hours at a time, thus far, had proved quite tedious. Could she have the courage to throw caution to the wind, and even her reputation, to take a turn around the terrace with a known rake? The thought titillated.

In a moment of complete irrationality, she dropped her hand into his, and a smile broke over his features as he helped her to her feet. Her arm hooked around his elbow, he led her along the perimeter of the room, pushing through the heated stench of sweat and perfume. They slipped out the French doors onto the terrace beyond. The cool waft of air that greeted them felt delightful. The clean breeze drove away the unpleasant odor and carried with it the pleasant smell of fresh earth. The sound of the driving rain drowned out the din from the assembly room.

Strolling along the side of the veranda, she observed a couple hidden in the darkness, wrapped in a passionate embrace. Mortified beyond belief, her mouth dropped open at the display. They were *not* at some Cyprian’s ball she’d once heard her friend whisper about. Yet she couldn’t help her curiosity as she watched the occupied pair, unaware that they had a voyeur. Shocked, they walked past the two without so much as a glance from them as she gained a good look at who they were.

Lady Neely wrapped in the embrace of a man who, to all appearances, was *not*

her husband. Granted, her spouse was old enough to be her grandfather, but it was still expected that a wife remain faithful. Well, at least that's what Winifred expected. Turning her head away from the two, she observed Lord Leahaven's amused expression.

"My dear, you're blushing."

Her eyes widened at his words, and she touched her warm cheeks. "You'd think she would have some decency," she whispered, dismayed.

He chuckled. "My dear, if we were all decent it would be dreadfully boring."

She gasped at his words. "You cannot condone what she is doing! It's immoral."

His shoulders lifted in a casual shrug. "I'm hardly within a position to naysay her."

Winifred paused. He was correct. The Devil's Trio never shied away from immorality. Always shocking the *ton*, raising some kind of breeze over something that would be gossiped about for weeks. Indeed he, in particular, dueled quite a bit over some cruel set-down that left the poor gentleman no recourse but to demand satisfaction. He had yet to be brought down by fist, rapier or musket.

They continued to walk in silence, listening to the patter of rain against the roof and landscape beyond. A smooth gust of wind blew across the terrace and sent goose bumps along her skin, prompting a shiver.

"Cold?"

She looked up at cool, dark eyes in the dimness. "A little."

He ran a gloved hand along her skin, and her nerve endings came alive and the hair on the skin of her arm rose in response. His arm wrapped around her shoulder, his hand skimming her arm in a vain attempt to warm her. His body emanated heat, and she relished the warmth as they continued in silence.

As they turned the corner and slowed to a stop, she found they were quite out of eyeshot should anyone appear on the terrace. He slipped her behind one of the large potted plants that Montrose House was known for. Her heart heaved a double beat as her back touched the cool brick behind her, trapped between two ceramic pots and an impenetrable wall of male.

Tilting her head back, she stared at the mischievous expression on his face and felt a stab of apprehension. Had he planned this? "My lord, step away." Her voice was firm, demanding he yield.

He smiled, a languorous rise of his lips, his eyelids lowered in clandestine seductiveness. "I shan't. Do not rob me of my attempt to be chivalrous and keep you warm."

"With my back up against this cold wall?" she scoffed.

He raised one shoulder in a casual shrug. "There are other means, my dear."

Immediate thoughts of Lady Neely came to mind, and she knew what he referred to. His hand rested just above her shoulder, and she wondered why she had considered it safe to come out here with him. Granted, it was too late to ponder on it now, but she refused to be treated like some barque of frailty to be taken advantage of. "I am not interested in other means."

His head slanted as he observed her for a tense moment, yet he didn't relent. "Has anyone told you how beautiful you are?"

She drew in a harsh breath at his words. Indeed, she had heard many false flatteries before, and all by those supposed suitors interested in her inheritance. "I've had



a good amount of Spanish coin turned in my direction.”

His eyes glittered with intensity in the dim light. “Is that what you think I am giving you?”

She frowned at him, unmoved by his vague expression of hurt. “Of course.”

“Is there any way that I can prove to you that I am genuine?”

“Not a thing.”

His chuckle proved she hadn't hurt his feelings at all. He fell into silence but didn't move. His eyes searched her face and the smile eased from his lips as he assumed a serious air. “Are you so doubtful of your beauty?”

Winifred turned away from his knowing gaze to look beyond him, as she tried to gather her scattered wits at his poignant words. Steeling herself, she faced him with a stiff smile upon her lips. “How I see myself hardly matters here.”

He shook his head, the movement slow and calculated. “It does matter.”

The conversation was shifting into tender territory, so she aimed to gain control. “My lord, I am finding this conversation tedious, and I demand you move back this instant.”

Why she ever thought he would listen to her she didn't know, but true to form, he ignored her. “My dear, there is certainly nothing tedious about this.” His hand moved and touched her waist; the heat of his fingers penetrated the fabric and sent thrills of delight through her.

“Stop,” she demanded, her tone coming out in a rasp.

A slow smile broke over his features, and she knew he thought he had her. The notion acted like fire as her anger surfaced. Little did he know that she often dealt with men such as he, and considered herself an expert hand at giving a gentleman the proper set-down.

His head began to descend and she reacted with lightening speed. Her closed fan snapped up, halting his advance, the ivory sticks pressed on his lips, keeping them at bay. “Sir, I'm not some ladybird that is easily swayed by a man that flies to the time of day. I am a genteel woman, and I find it quite rude of you to think that I would act so ... so scandalously.”

He pushed back yet didn't move away, a mischievous grin showing her words had no real impact. “Oh, but my dear, are you still cold?”

She paused. “No I'm not,” she said with a smug grin of her own. She wouldn't need his *assistance* after all.

Leahaven tilted his head, indicating that he had planned this all along. “I thought not.”

\* \* \* \*

Ransom left his quarry by the refreshments table, but dared not give her a parting kiss over her fingers. He expected her to rap her fan over his knuckles should he try. Indeed, it hadn't gone as well as he anticipated, and it bothered him that she appeared to be fragile behind the hard façade she presented to the *ton*. This demanded his attention. Niggling guilt ate at him, and he faltered in his will to continue with the wager. Perhaps the best course of action would be to lay the bet aside. The consequences of such a ridiculous game could prove dire if he continued on this path.

Pushing past the dense groups of revelers, he mounted the stairs up to the balcony beyond. His friends turned at his approach, and he knew they had watched his progress.

Unable to stay the scowl that ran across his features, he came to a halt.

"Harder than you expected." Anterton's words had a gloating tone. His smug expression called forth Leahaven's hatred of backing down from a challenge. His previous inclinations were pushed aside in the face of his friend's self-assuredness.

"Not at all," he denied. "She might have a bit of steel to her, but she is still a woman begging to be charmed."

Anterton chuckled. "But not in a week."

"Granted it will take me a bit longer than expected, but we didn't specify a time, did we?"

With a casual shrug, Anterton turned to lean forward onto the banister, the conversation closed for discussion.

Taking up his previous position, he glanced over the balcony into the crowd beyond to find that Lady Winifred stood where he had left her. Gone was the expression of vague boredom as she searched the room, her eyes moved across the seething mass, then rose to him. The clear blue-green pools gazed at him surrounded by his friends.

Satisfaction washed over him as he stared back at her. He smiled as a pink tinge shaded her cheeks. Perhaps it wouldn't be as difficult as he first anticipated. She wasn't as unmoved as he first surmised.

"Do you know what she is doing tomorrow?" he asked Carlyle.

His friend groaned. "Why are you asking me?"

"Because your sister will know."

Simon passed him a furious stare. "And have her think I've set my sights on that gel? I think not."

Ransom shrugged, his attention turned back to Lady Winifred, who no longer looked at him but at something or someone in the crowd. "Very well then. I will find out myself."

Anterton chuckled. "And how do you propose to do that?"

"Why, ask her of course."

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For a moment Winifred stared at Lord Leahaven on the balcony above. His small smile sent tingles of pleasure through her, that stubborn lock of hair forever hanging over his brow made him seem that much more sensual. His eyes twinkled with inner knowledge. Then he turned away to talk to his friend and left her alone in the crowd of people.

She cast her attention around the room and wondered if anyone had noticed when she left to stroll along the terrace. Among the revelers she noticed a swatch of fabric, a cool burgundy skirt that glittered in the light, and was making a line straight for her.

The crowd parted and Winifred's curiosity melted into surprise as Lady Neely came into view. The woman possessed a great beauty, her black hair arranged in a stylish coiffure, her brown eyes aglow with an inner vibrancy as she drew near Winifred.

Glancing about her, wondering who the woman approached, she saw that few people stood around her. She held her ground as the lady ate up the distance between them and came to a stop beside her. Lady Neely turned to look over the crowd as she fanned herself. "Lah, what a crush," she exclaimed, after a moment of silence.

Winifred glanced at her. "Yes."

Lady Neely made no show of polite conversation as she eyed her with

speculation. "My dear, I do find it interesting, you taking a turn around the terrace with Lord Leahaven."

Stifling the gasp that came to her lips, she covered it with a discreet cough, and her eyes flicked over Lady Neely's amused expression. It became obvious now that the woman hadn't been so wrapped up in her ... embrace, since she had noticed them slip by. Goodness, had the lady heard what she said? The idea mortified.

"I don't know what you mean." Trying for denial. It worked for her mother quite often.

Lady Neely laughed. A husky sound. "You, my girl, are quite refreshing. Who would have thought the Marquis of Samford's daughter was so forward."

"I am hardly that. It's not unheard of to stroll along the terrace."

"But without a chaperone?"

Winifred glanced around, fearful of being overheard. "We did nothing untoward."

"Spending time with one of the Devil's Trio screams of scandal, my dear."

Dread began to seep into her bones. "Are you going to tell my father?"

Amusement twinkled in the woman's eyes. "I won't if you won't. Besides," she announced as she moved the subject along, "I'm getting quite bored of these tight-laced ladies." She tapped her closed fan on Winifred's arm. "You seem like someone to have a good lark with."

Winifred frowned. She *was* tight-laced. She never stepped over the line of propriety ... well, that is to say, until tonight. And, as luck would have it, she'd been spotted. "I'm not usually like that," she attempted to explain.

"Leahaven is hardly a man to seek out an unattached gel. I assure you, this won't be the last time you will be caught in the shadows with that man."

That thought sent swirls of anticipation through her. Was it true? He appeared unperturbed when she mentioned the prospect of her disinheritance. A clear difference from the other gentlemen who sought her out. Indeed, he even tried to kiss her! Heat suffused her face at the reminder of her encounter.

"I doubt he spent time with me beyond boredom," Winifred said.

Lady Neely laughed at her comment, producing several looks from people within their vicinity. "My dear, you are quite delightful!"

Horried, Winifred moved to calm her. "Pray, please contain yourself. We are attracting attention."

Lady Neely complied and covered her mouth with a gloved hand, her eyes twinkling with mirth. "I apologize," she murmured through her fingers.

They settled into silence while Winifred passed another glance up at the balcony to find he still stood there, watching her with keen interest. The heat of his gaze pierced her, and she could not decide if she should look away like a gently bred young woman or brazenly ignore propriety to have her fill of him. Graced with devilish charm and seductive attractiveness, he pierced her heart with his fatal cupid's arrow as a smile tilted his lips.

He leaned forward onto the banister; resting his elbows on the railing as his bold regard ran over her. A moment passed and a slow, sure smile broke over his features as he winked. She gasped and her eyes snapped away from him.

Lady Neely chuckled. "Oh, he has marked you his, my dear."

Could what Lady Neely said be true? The idea of being in the shadows with him again didn't seem so objectionable to her right now, and she was mortified that she would even entertain such a notion.

My Lord, she was stepping into dangerous territory.

## Chapter Two

The following day she strolled along Russell Street with Cecilia, her closest friend and cousin. "He did what?" Cecelia exclaimed, her brown eyes widened in disbelief.

"Shh," Winifred cautioned in earnest and cast a quick glance around her. "He tried to kiss me."

"Why that is scandalous," she whispered. "And for you to even consider going out on the terrace with him--quite rag-mannered, I tell you."

"I know," she replied, gripping Cecilia's elbow as she tilted her head that much closer to her cousin, who stood a good few inches shorter than her.

"I hope you gave him a good set-down he so rightfully deserved." Her lips pursed in disapproval.

"Of course."

Cecelia nodded her head, the feather in her orange turban bobbed with vigor. "I hope that deterred him."

"I'm afraid not."

Cecilia's head snapped toward her, the self-satisfied gleam withering from her gaze. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, he ... he *winked* at me."

Her answer was greeted by a gasp. "Scandalous! You should steer clear of him, Winnie. That man is nothing but trouble."

"Well, he *is* one of the Devil's Trio."

"All the more reason to avoid him. Besides, your father will be furious should he find out."

She looked down at Cecilia, her brows furrowed. "You aren't going to tell him, are you?"

Her hand fluttered to her chest. "Heavens, no!"

With her fears assuaged, Winifred glanced up at the pregnant clouds overhead. It was positively the worst time for a stroll. The morose atmosphere was stagnant with humidity, and the street was perhaps not as crowded as it could be. Those who had a choice probably preferred to stay indoors on a day like this. But Winifred felt she needed to talk to someone about the events of the night before and Cecilia hadn't attended the Montrose ball so wasn't abreast of the incident. The prospect of talking to her about it in some drawing room where servants could overhear mortified her.

Lifting the hem of her beige morning dress, she skirted around a puddle and noted with distaste the mud that stained it. "Goodness, this better prove to be worth it," she muttered.

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"About Lord Leahaven? What can I do?"

"You should send him a letter," Cecilia said with authority.

Winifred laughed. "And what do you propose I say?"

Cecilia shrugged. "I don't know. He sounds frightfully sinful. And he should

never approach innocent young ladies such as us. It's disgraceful behavior from him, I am sure."

They made a wide circle around another large puddle, the murky water shimmering in the strong breeze that pushed against their clothes. Winifred glanced at her cousin. "Well, what do you propose? Lady Neely seems to believe that I am bound to have more encounters with him."

Cecilia harrumphed. "If you send him a letter expressing your distaste for his company, I guarantee you he--should he prove himself to be any type of gentleman--will heed your wishes and step aside."

"Are you certain?"

"Of course I am, and if I am wrong may God strike me down where I stand."

As though to answer her words, the heavens opened up and drenched them with fat drops of rain. Both sucked in a gasp of equal surprise as they made a run for Montagu House. Holding onto her skirt to keep from tripping over it, Winifred tried to see ahead despite the heavy downpour of water that hindered her view. Panting for a breath, she could see in her peripheral vision Cecilia sprinting beside her. They drew close to the building, mounted the stairs, and came to a stop under the entrance of the museum.

They stood under the roof and found they were not the only ones to seek shelter out of the rain. Several people huddled there with them, staring with annoyance at the clouds.

Cecilia shifted next to her. Her soaked turban now appeared scarlet from the rain, and her brown hair hung in wet clumps around her face. Her cousin pulled off her wet glasses and grimaced, then proceeded to fumble through her reticule to retrieve a handkerchief. A sigh of frustration slipped through her lips at the wet fabric. Cecilia looked like a drowned cat, and Winifred knew she came off not much better.

Winifred chuckled, which prompted a frown from her cousin. "What is so amusing?"

"God answered." She indicated to the sky.

With a small smile Cecilia slipped her glasses back on and squinted at the gray clouds. "Well, I'd say that we are going to be waiting a while."

She agreed. Glancing around, Winifred grimaced at the cluttered people that pressed around her, stifling the air. "Shall we go inside and view the exhibits?"

Cecilia nodded, and without further ado they made their way into the building, jostling several people in the process. They passed through the hall and walked up the grand staircase. With a cursory glance, she observed paintings on the walls that owed a lot to Greek and Roman influence. Cool air whistled up the hall behind her, and she shivered at the wind that bit into her skin.

She turned to her cousin. "I don't see why you had to ask Geeves to leave. We could be on our way home now."

"Geeves hates to wait. He's terribly rude that way."

Winifred nodded with a thoughtful frown. Geeves had worked for her cousin's family for as long as she could remember. In fact, she had the distinct feeling that Cecilia might be afraid of the man. "Next time, we shall take my carriage."

Her cousin's relief said it all.

"Do you know when he'll be back?" Winifred asked.

"He said an hour."

“An hour! My goodness. We’ll definitely be taking my carriage next time.”

They strolled through vast rooms full of Roman influenced paintings on the ceiling and statues above the entranceways. The dried butterflies captured her attention and they stopped to observe the vast collection of natural specimens. After a quick perusal, they moved along, elbows hooked together as they walked, the sound of their footsteps echoing in the cavernous space.

The musky scent of the building filled her senses. Despite the downpour, light filtered through the large paned windows that lined the structure as the rain beat against the glass. The constant thrumming added to the sense of tranquility that permeated the room. They traveled through the vast chambers and entered another, new section filled with sculptures and Egyptian discoveries.

Fascinated, they slowed to view the items in detail. Pausing over a particular stone, she stared at the markings upon it, her eyes squinting at the etchings. The gray rock was marked with what looked like little primitive pictures and random scribbles of lines.

“My goodness,” exclaimed Cecilia. “This was found by French soldiers when they were rebuilding a fort.”

Winifred pulled back. “How do you know that?”

“It’s written here.” She pointed to the note that detailed the finding.

“To think that this beautiful piece could have been missed, staying forever buried, never to see the light of day,” she mused.

“I agree,” a smooth voice intoned behind them.

Gasping in surprise, she whirled to find Lord Leahaven standing behind her. The soft tilt of his lips sent a frizzle of heat through her body. “My lord.” Her hand fluttered to her chest. “You gave me a terrible fright.”

His eyes twinkled at her words, yet his expression remained somber. “My dear Lady, it was not my intent.”

He looked so handsome. His beige breeches stretched against his muscled legs and his jacket accentuated his broad shoulders. She couldn’t form a proper sentence when he looked at her so. Her mind scrambled over last night’s incident. A set-down fluttered through her head, but she found herself unable to grasp onto it.

At that moment, Cecilia stepped in. “My lord, I think it rude of you that you would dare seek us out. Scandalous, I tell you!”

He eyed her cousin with vague amusement, his brow cocked in query. “Indeed?”

“Yes, indeed,” she harrumphed.

Winifred’s mouth parted as he tipped his chin to the side, appearing unaffected by Cecilia’s censure; her suspicions were confirmed when he turned to her. “I see you are admiring the fine art and rarities. I also have an interest in such things.” The gleam in his eye implied his words contained a double meaning.

“Well ... yes.”

His gaze flicked over her, and a self-satisfied grin pulled at his lips as though he undressed her with his eyes and liked what he saw. “Shall we take a stroll through the rest of the exhibits?”

Winifred’s eyes widened at his words. A tingling heat ran through her body, crawled along her neck, and warmed her cheeks. Her mouth opened to utter a retort, yet none came to mind. Cecilia was quick to intercede. “We shall *not*,” she admonished, as

she stepped in front of Winifred.

Lord Leahaven tilted his head. "My dear, I believe we have yet to be introduced."

Cecilia gasped, a mortified blush sweeping across her cheeks. "I know who you are, and you will not be gaining an introduction from Winnie."

"Very well," he agreed. "Then I shall leave you to wander the room."

Winifred forced her gaze away from his retreating back.

"See," Cecilia said with a firm nod. "That's all it takes. A strong, unmovable moral ground."

She nodded in response, yet inside the strong moral fiber her cousin spoke of wavered under the spell of his presence. She considered it mere luck she had survived last night, how close she came to succumbing to him terrified her.

Hooking an arm around her, Cecilia drew her away from the Rosetta stone. Winifred couldn't help but pass a curious stare over her shoulder to find him leaning against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest. His lop-sided grin broadened as he winked at her.

Cecilia led her down the hall, her pace brisk and purposeful as she all but dragged her from the room. Disappointed when they didn't even pause to view several pieces of interest, Winifred ceded to her cousin's wish, understanding her desire for safety. Once away from Lord Leahaven, a glance behind her confirmed he wasn't following after them, and Cecilia slowed down.

They sauntered through the rest of the house at a languorous pace and observed the rest of the antiquities before they turned to find their way back. The room that held the Townley statues and Egyptian exhibits bustled with noise, filled with people escaping the rain.

Shivering in her wet clothing, she cursed Geeves yet again. Indeed, she remained cold and uncomfortable for almost an hour as they strolled through the room and this time observed several pieces of interest. She paused over a beautiful sculpture, Cecilia forgotten as she stared at the white stone that reflected the dull light shining through the windows.

Moving forward, she stared at the piece with awe. In between the petals of the stone sunflower rose a woman wearing a sheer robe. The sheet was draped around her chest in such a way that it looked as though it would fall from her body at any given moment. She could almost imagine the lady wearing nothing but that sheer fabric. Leaning closer to look at the statue's features, she clenched her hands to keep from touching it. She was evocative and breathtaking in all her glory. A true work of art.

Sighing at her beauty, she moved on to the next figure, a man bent over, his arm outstretched, his hand grasping a discus. Both fascinated and dismayed by the sculpture, she stared at the naked torso, his muscles tensed and forever held in time. Her gaze roamed over the detail, and she wondered if Lord Leahaven's figure--

"Fascinating, is it not?"

With a small squeal of surprise, she turned to find Lord Leahaven behind her. Chagrined, she passed a cursory scan around her and found her cousin lost among the patrons milling about. Heat washed through her, not from fury but something deeper, something primal. "What are you doing here?"

"Observing classical beauty."

Again, the feeling that the statues were not the subject of his remarks pricked at



her, but the other alternative seemed absurd. "I thought you would have left before now."

He cast a glance at the window. "Alas, no. It had not occurred to me to arm myself with an umbrella." He eyed her for a moment. "I see that you too were caught unawares."

Her chin tilted. "Our driver has disappeared, otherwise we wouldn't have been caught in the downpour."

"Do you require transport?"

"Certainly not," she huffed. "Now, my lord, I demand you step back, you are standing far too close. It's inappropriate."

He glanced behind him. "I would if I could, my dear. But, as you can see, the room is filled."

Winifred doubted his reason for standing so near. He stepped along the border of propriety, not enough to draw attention to them, but enough for her to know his presence. She could feel his heat through the fabric of her dress! Taking a discreet step back, she slipped past him, the warm fabric of his clothes brushing against her arm. A tingle of fire spread along her skin as Lord Leahaven proved once again to be a danger to her senses.

Jostling aside a few people in her haste to move away, she found Cecilia making her way toward her and had never felt so relieved to see her. Grasping her hand, she drew her companion in. "What happened?"

"I thought you were behind me. Hurry, the hour is almost up. We must be outside waiting for Geeves, otherwise heaven knows what he'll do."

With that, they hurried from the building and into the street beyond. The rain had let up and only drizzled, the soft drops hitting her skin as she turned to scan the street. Unable to see the Maypin carriage, she glanced at her friend, an expression of anxiety running over her features. "Do you think he may have left us again?"

Winifred scanned the area again. They might well be walking back to the West End. "I don't know."

Cecilia let out a worried moan at her response.

"Come, it's best if we wait under cover."

They walked back to Montagu House but not without casting occasional quick searches in hopes the coach would appear. Standing under the entranceway of the building, she hugged her body against the cool wind that breezed through. Ten minutes passed in silence, and with every second that ticked by Cecilia became more agitated. If Geeves didn't show up soon, they would be well and truly stuck.

Sighing, Winifred moved aside a thread of hair that swayed in her face and gazed at her cousin with sympathy. "He'll be here soon, I'm sure."

She bit her lip. "No, no. He isn't coming, of that I am certain. What are we going to do?"

What could they do? The rain poured down now and they knew not a single person that would assist them home. That is to say, she didn't know anyone *honorable* who would do so. "I don't know."

Cecilia looked as though she wanted to cry. Her chin wobbled, her arms wrapped around her body, and a soft layer of tears glazed her eyes. "Mother is going to be terribly upset with me."

"Not to worry, Cel," she assured as she dropped her arm over Cecilia's shoulders. "We'll think of something."

“Do you ladies require assistance?”

Winifred wasn't surprised to find that Lord Leahaven had stumbled upon them once more. But she drew in a stunned breath when Cecilia answered, “Yes. Our driver seems to have forgotten about us.”

He glanced over their shoulders at the street beyond. “My carriage is just beyond that corner, if you could brave the rain,” he suggested.

Cecilia gave a firm nod. “I can manage that.”

He tilted his chin. “Very well.” Pausing for a brief study of the sky, he turned to them and smiled. He began to unbutton his jacket, shrugged out of it, and handed it to Cecilia, revealing a smooth, pale-blue vest and white shirt. “Alas, I shan't be removing any more articles of clothing. It would be quite embarrassing, so you must make do with what I have.”

Cecilia looked at his jacket, before hooking it over her head, drawing Winifred under it with her. “No, this is fine. Thank you, my lord.”

“Shall we?”

They followed him out into the street at a brisk pace, the drizzles of rain soaking into their clothes as they hurried along after him. The view of his back thrilled Winifred; he possessed quite a marvelous physique, far better than the sculptures in Montagu House.

They followed him until he stopped next to a black carriage. Without a word, he opened the door and assisted them inside, got Cecilia's address to relay to the driver, then climbed in after them.

Shivering in the dank space, she huddled up against her cousin as the carriage jerked into motion. Leahaven sat across from them and handed a sheet over. Thanking him, Cecilia shook out the woolen blanket and draped it around their shoulders, then handed him his drenched jacket in return.

As they jostled inside the cabin, Winifred stole a peek of him. It was better than looking at the drab landscape outside. His hair lay in even lines, brushed back by his fingers, the dark locks draped across his ears, droplets easing down his cheek. She swallowed hard at the skin revealed by the soaked fabric of his white shirt. The humidity in the tight space stifled her, but it had nothing to do with the weather.

He adjusted in his seat, and his strong legs brushed against hers for but a split second. She gasped as her focus snapped to his face. He gazed back at her through heavy-lidded eyes, as a slow, confident smile graced his lips. Her heart picked up pace, and she broke their stare to turn her attention out the window. Warmth tingled along her skin and crept along her cheeks as she recalled the way she had looked at him. No, no moral fibre there.

## Chapter Three

The ride to the Maypin townhouse became quite tedious, and Winifred could feel his heated stare on her, but she dared not look over at him. Her cousin moved in to fill the silence as she thanked Leahaven again for his assistance.

He tilted his head in acknowledgement. "You are most welcome. Your driver should not have forgotten about you. Indeed, such behavior warrants a dismissal."

She shook her head in response. "Oh no, that will never happen," she said, forlorn.

Leahaven frowned but remained quiet until they reached their destination.

First to climb out of the carriage, he assisted them down in the rain. Using the blanket to shelter them from the downpour, they mounted the stairs and stood under the small Palladian-style entranceway found in all the homes along the street.

He glanced behind him and squinted at the dark rain clouds overhead before he turned his attention to them. "My dears, now that I have seen you to safety, I must away." The twinkle in his eyes revealed his wit.

"Oh no, my lord," Cecilia interceded. "It would be rude of me not to invite you in after your timely assistance."

Opening the front door, she led the way up the stairs. Her mother emerged from the drawing room, brown eyes flashing, her lips pursed in anger. "Where have you-- Oh!" She stopped. Her furious gaze faltered and settled into curiosity at the gentleman behind them.

"Mother, Lord Leahaven was kind enough to assist us home."

Lady Maypin glanced at Cecilia, and a gentle smile formed on her lips, as though her previous anger never was. Her attention shifted to Leahaven. "My lord, thank you for seeing to my daughter. Come, will you not warm yourself by our fire?"

Nodding his acceptance, he stepped around them and followed Lady Maypin into the room, leaving Winifred and Cecilia to make themselves presentable.

\* \* \* \*

Ransom sat in a quaint drawing room, the cool beige wallpaper and mahogany furniture a clear mixture of taste and wealth. With a sigh he leaned back in the armchair and ran his hands over the smooth burgundy fabric, relishing the luxury that was now lost to him. The warmth of the fire was a welcome change from the cool carriage ride he would have to endure once he left.

Grimacing at the feel of wet cloth upon his skin, he shifted in his seat and glanced up as a parlor maid handed him a blanket to drape across his shoulders. He thanked the young woman with a charming smile, and she blushed under his attention before she scurried off to attend to another chore.

Lady Maypin arranged to have tea brought in, while he propped his feet up near the hearth. The warmth penetrated his legs and offered him comfort. She asked him if he required anything more, to which he responded with a negative and a smile at the woman's eagerness to please.

Indeed, despite being an Earl, he was in dun territory, but had thus far been able to hide it from the general public. Rather than face financial ruin, his father had killed himself. He discovered the grim state of his finances while the suicide made its run through the vicious gossip mill of the *ton*.

He then aspired to recreate himself and become that much more scandalous, to shift the attention away from his father. He bit down hard at the hot rage and cold despair that threatened to overwhelm him. The morose day helped matters not at all.

"Would you care for some tea?" Lady Maypin asked.

Thankful for the interruption, he managed a debonair smile and nodded his acceptance. While the Countess poured his tea, Lady Winifred and Lady Cecilia entered the room.

He stood as they glided in, and his gaze settled on Winifred as she moved across the space to take a seat upon the chaise longue. Although she wore the same gown, it had been dried, her hair rearranged into a neat coiffure. It was blind luck that she had been at Montagu House today, and he couldn't have been more grateful for the turn of fate and the weather.

Accepting his cup of tea, he sat back and observed her over the rim as he sipped. Her gaze remained averted from him, and he could see a faint tinge of color rise along her cheeks. Strawberries. He smiled behind his cup. It made him think of strawberries.

"I must thank you for bringing my daughter home," said Lady Maypin. "She is terribly tardy sometimes."

He noticed Cecilia's lips purse under her mother's admonishment, and he felt the need to correct her. "Lady Maypin, I believe your driver was at fault for this."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean your driver left these gentlewomen in the rain to fend for themselves for almost an hour."

"Geeves? He would never do such a thing."

"Indeed, he did," he rejected. "Had I not been there to assist your daughter, they would now be walking home. This Geeves is stepping over the bounds of propriety and forgetting his place, and he should be reprimanded."

Her mouth dropped open at his words. It was clear that she didn't often have the experience of being reproved herself. "Well! I shall see what his explanation is."

*What explanation is there to give?* Incredulously he stared at Lady Maypin, and it became clear to him then that this woman didn't intend to discharge her driver. In fact, it wouldn't surprise him if the driver did more than transport the family around.

They fell into silence. The sound of the rain that pattered against the window and the crackling of embers broke into the quiet.

"So, Lord Leahaven, did you enjoy the exhibits?"

He glanced up at Cecilia who, much to his relief, seemed far more amiable to him. He couldn't have asked for a better solution to her protectiveness. "Indeed, I did. I thought the Egyptian artifacts were quite interesting. And what about you?"

She lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "I don't know. They were all nice."

He turned to Winifred, who was in the process of pouring herself a cup of tea and seemed preoccupied. "And you, my dear?"

She glanced up at him. Her aquamarine eyes widened at his question; her blush deepened. "Me?" she squeaked.

"Why, yes. Did you find anything that struck your interest? Anything particularly ... fascinating?"

The teapot she held trembled in her grasp as she stared at him and placed it back on the tray. "I ... I found them all very nice."

He grinned at her evasion. A strange sense of excitement penetrated the coldness around his heart at this new game she played. She rubbed her hands along her skirt, her fingers pleating the fabric in nervous energy.

He settled back in his seat. "Indeed. I especially found the Townley Collection of Roman statues quite remarkable."

She licked her lips while her eyes darted about the room. "Did you?"

"Indeed, I did. The Disc Thrower was quite a specimen wouldn't you agree?"

That produced a simultaneous gasp from Cecilia and Winifred. "I wouldn't know," she lied with a tilt of her shoulder. "I didn't have a very good look at some of the statues."

He wanted to chuckle at her prevarication. The bold woman on the terrace was gone, replaced by a shy, proper young lady. "But the Disc Thrower didn't escape your notice?"

She stiffened in her seat under his persistence, her eyes narrowed as she stared at him. "Well, no. I thought that statue a fine piece of art."

Ah, there she is.

Nodding at her reply, he swallowed another sip of tea and enjoyed the smooth texture that warmed his body while he admired the view. Who would've thought that the Marquis of Samford had such a titillating daughter? His grinned at the gleam in her eye as she glanced at him over the rim of her cup. He could see he made her uncomfortable by forcing her to answer.

Well, she did look at that statue in such a way that would cause one to wonder what she thought about. Come to think of it. What *had* she been thinking of? Better yet, what type of imaginings had she been entertaining, and with whom was she imagining them? That would prove to be an interesting conversation.

With a quick glance out the window, he noticed that the rain had let up. "Well, I must be off," he said as he stood.

Lady Maypin stood also. "Now?"

"I'm afraid so. I need to change from my drenched clothing."

He stifled the chuckle that came to his lips at the cut-throat gleam that entered Lady Maypin's gaze at his marriage potential. Her attention flittered to her daughter and back to him. "I am having a soirée at our estate three weeks hence," she said. "I would be honored if you would attend."

He smiled. It was just what he wanted. "It would be my pleasure."

With that said he sketched a bow, made his farewells, and left. The game was proceeding nicely.

\* \* \* \*

The Epsom Downs Derby was perhaps the only event her father enjoyed; he called it the sport of Kings. Every June he dragged both her and her mother along with him to view the fine thoroughbreds on display, followed by a chase after the racers. Indeed, his eagerness could be the reason he had yet to notice she was no longer behind him.

Winifred stared about her in frustration, once again left alone, and this time among a crowd of strangers. She had arrived here with both her parents--and had managed to lose both of them. Her mother had run into Lady Witherspoon, the notorious town gossip, and despite both her and her father's complaints, they were unable to extricate Lady Samford from Witherspoon's side.

Left with a choice, Winifred chose to follow after her father, who wished to view the horses. It was either that or stay with her mother and suffer through constant questions about her as yet unmarried state. Now lost in a throng of people, she knew that remaining with the ladies would've served her better.

Pushing through the herds of horse racing enthusiasts, muttering apologies as she slipped through the crowd, she searched for the familiar shoulders of her father. Disheartened, she dipped her head, turned to retreat, and was jostled roughly in the shoulder by a gentleman passing her. She gasped at the contact and stumbled forward into the solid chest of another man, whose arms reached about to steady her.

"Steady now."

She looked up to find herself wrapped in the arms of Lord Leahaven, a slight grin pulling at his lips. Must he always find her alone? When his arms remained clasped around her waist, she scowled at him. "I am quite all right now."

He chuckled at her tart reply and gave her waist a small, gentle squeeze before releasing her. She ought to turn and walk away, and yet for some inexplicable reason she remained where she stood, staring at his amused expression with a glower of her own. She despised his timing, yet a small part of her thrilled at it.

"Why must you always find me at the most inopportune times?" she asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

He grinned. "Inopportune for you, perhaps, but not so for me. In fact, I am quite surprised to find you at such an event. And watching the prime steppers for the race, no less."

"I am not interested in those beasts. I merely lost my way," she said with a sniff.

"Indeed?" He glanced over her shoulder at the horses, and a forlorn look entered his eyes, but he dropped his gaze and sighed. "I shall be a gentleman and lead you back to your parents."

Guilt invaded her senses. If he were as much of an enthusiast as her father over the Derby, he would be vastly disappointed not to view them before the race. "No, no. It's quite all right, I assure you. I can find my way perfectly fine."

His intense gaze fell on her, and she felt as though he could see to her very soul. "No. I shan't leave you in distress. Come." He held out his elbow. "We shall leave this crowd and get some fresh air."

Hesitating for but a moment, she slipped her arm around his and allowed him to ease them from the throng of people. They wandered along the grounds, the crowd dissipating as they moved away from the track.

They continued up a gentle slope, a soft breeze ruffling the leaves of the surrounding oaks. She breathed in the earthy scent, the buzzing sound of excitement dimming in the distance. It was such a peaceful stroll, and Winifred loathed the prospect of turning back, but knew that propriety demanded she do so. "I think this is far enough," she said, pulling them to a halt.

He cast her a look, his eyes searching hers for a moment before relenting.

Turning, he looked back over the field. She saw the crowd of people vie for the perfect position to view the race, while other gentlemen mounted, preparing to gallop alongside the thoroughbreds in the competition.

"Perfect," he said with a satisfied sigh, and began to unbutton his burgundy jacket, revealing a cream vest beneath.

Winifred's eyes widened as he eased out of his coat, all thoughts of protest lost at the sight of his powerful physique. Instant images of the Disc Thrower came to mind and a wave of heat skittered across her skin as he knelt and laid his coat on the grass.

"Whatever are you doing?"

A brow rose at her sharp tone. "It's not as crowded as it usually is, but I believe this is an ideal spot to view the races."

"View the races?" she asked incredulously. "My mother will be frantic looking for me."

She would've thought that was enough to cause him to return her, but he merely shrugged, unconcerned. Indeed, in this case there was safety in numbers, but his knowing look and casual disregard for her wishes told her more than she wanted to know.

"My dear, I doubt either parent would note your absence."

Though that was true, Winifred felt it rude of him to point that out. She lifted her chin in defiance, her arms crossing over her chest as she looked at him sternly. "No matter. I demand you return me to my mother this instant. If you do not, I shall be forced to find her myself."

He peered up at her then, his eyes searching, before he relented with a sigh.

"Very well. But, perhaps we shall wait until the race begins, when the crowd subsides?"

Glancing over her shoulder at the milling multitude, she hesitated, her bluff called as she stared over the exuberant mass. She didn't relish the idea of going back there to be pushed, shoved and ignored. At this moment, under Lord Leahaven's regard, she wasn't experiencing any of those things. In fact, she found herself experiencing something quite different. She hesitated, battling with her common sense, before she yielded and allowed him to assist her to her ground, his jacket providing a buffer between her and the moist earth.

Spreading her skirt about her, she watched from the corner of her eye as he settled beside her, stretching his long frame across the ground, his head resting on his elbow. Wrapping her hands in her lap, she breathed in the fresh scent of nature and smiled, her eyes sliding shut as she listened to the dim hum of excitement intermixed with the flutter of leaves and the distant song of birds. Though she was very conscious of Lord Leahaven's presence beside her, for the first time she felt at ease with herself. The pressure in her chest and the constant whisper of self-doubt disappeared for a moment and offered her peace.

"Be still my heart."

The awe in his voice snapped her back to reality, her confidence fading like the dawn as she looked down at him, his expression enrapt. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

His eyes widened at her words, confusion marking his brow as he sat up. "It's the first time that I think I have seen your dazzling smile."

She shrugged, attempting to appear unmoved by his observation, yet could do little to still the surge of pleasure within her. "Is it so unusual for a lady to enjoy the

weather?"

Ransom chuckled. "Indeed not. It's a beautiful thing to see such joy on a woman's lips. I wish I could control the weather, so I could see such joy on your face every day and know that I made that happen."

A tingling sensation ran up her arms at his words, a feeling followed by an unusual stirring in the pit of her stomach that unsettled her. "My lord, you speak of fancy. I hardly think that one would wish for such things."

"I would," he said sotto voce. "I would pluck the stars from the sky if it would give you joy."

"Why?"

"Because it would give me pleasure to see you smile. Because you are so beautiful and yet so shy that you hide it. Even from yourself."

"Have you been drinking, sir?"

"If I am drunk, then I am drunk on your image. On divine beauty."

"You *are* bosky. You're speaking nonsense."

"No nonsense at all. Taste my lips and you shall know I am in charge of my wits."

She stared at his sincere expression, her heart thumping at his words and lighting a sputtering flame deep within her, the heat of it flaring across her skin. She raised her hands and covered her cheeks. "Pray, sir, must you speak to me so?"

He grasped one of her hands and brought it to his lips, his soft breath penetrating the fabric as he kissed her knuckles. "Indeed, I must."

She slipped her hand from his, his sigh of regret sending thrills of delight through her. "Desist. I find it quite unnerving."

Staring straight ahead, at nothing in particular, she could feel his smoldering gaze on her, and she waited in tense anticipation for him to defy her. When he sighed in resignation, she couldn't squelch the stab of disappointment as she slid him a coy glance to find him regarding her with an intensity that was so unsettling she had to turn away. She rocked forward, delight suffusing her body as she glanced at the final round of horses on display, a small smile touching her lips.

"Ah, there she is."

The wonder in his voice killed off her short-lived pleasure, replaced by an emotion she was very familiar with. Jealousy. Staring across the field she found no one approaching. She frowned in bemusement as she glanced at him. "Who?"

He looked at her, and then pointed at one of the thoroughbreds prancing the field. "Oriana. I raised her from a foal," he said, pride coloring his voice.

Winifred's mouth formed a silent 'Oh' as she stared at the filly; the sleek brown coat shimmered in the light as it tossed its head in anticipation. "I didn't know you had a passion for horses."

Removing his hat, he smoothed a hand over his dark locks, and a small, abashed frown furrowed his brow. "I have always had a respect for them."

She glanced over at the thoroughbreds on display again. Soon they would be racing for a chance of fame and money, a concept lost on the animals. "I would have thought you would be down there, proudly displaying your prize." When he didn't answer she glanced at him fiddling with the rim of his hat. "Is something amiss, my lord?"



He looked at her then, the slight smile that pulled at his lips belied the regret etched on his features. "I sold her to Sir William Gerard three weeks ago."

"That's terrible." Her attention cut across to the field and found Sir William standing by the filly. His proud popinjay stance could be seen from where she sat.

"It's of no consequence. He has promised me her first foal should she win."

"I hope she does."

"She will win today," he stated with confidence.

"How is it that you can be so certain?"

He leaned closer to her, his breath brushed against her cheek as he waved his finger around the general area of the horse. "See how her ears are straight up and down? It means she is alert. Her coat is smooth and free of sweat and she is not agitated. She is waiting to race."

Winifred shivered, and his warm breath skittered across her skin like fire. The horse was forgotten as she swam in the heated sensations he evoked. His breath faltered and she sensed his hesitation. Her eyes slid shut, and all thoughts of propriety and self-preservation were lost in the need for him to make her feel beautiful.

She lifted her chin a fraction and turned her face toward his, her eyes opening to be titillated by his intense gaze, his incandescent pools of azure darkened with raw emotion. Oh, if only he would kiss her.

## Chapter Four

Ransom sensed her supplication and couldn't be more pleased. His regret over a lost thoroughbred vanished in the deep luminous pools of blue-green, and the long lashes that spread over her half-open eyes. Her skin felt smooth as his fingers traveled along the column of her neck and cupped her cheek, her breath hitching at the contact.

Deep satisfaction engulfed him, drowning out all sound as he focused on her soft lips. His thumb ran across the delicate flesh. The heated moisture of her breath touched the ball of his finger, and he longed to take her mouth in a demanding seduction of passion and fire. He licked his lips, knowing she was susceptible to his advances, and experienced a wave of pleasure in her innocent acceptance as he leaned forward to take her lips in his.

"What is going on here?"

At the feminine screech Ransom lurched back and looked above Winifred's head to see a much older lady with a strong resemblance to the young woman he held marching toward them.

Winifred's horrified gasp told him all he needed to know. The lady fast approaching was her mother. What a bind. He glanced down at her and grinned at her wide-eyed expression before saying in a loud voice. "Aha! I think I have it. Your eye is clear now." He pulled back, flicking an imaginary speck off his finger. With a wink that prompted another gasp from her, he leaned back and assumed a casual air as he stood.

Lady Samford stopped before him, her uncertain gaze flicking between both him and Winifred. "Wha--what are you doing alone with this gentleman?"

"It's quite all right, mother," she assured, pushing to her feet, her hands rising in mollification. "I merely had something in my eye."

The woman eyed her daughter shrewdly. "Is that so?"

"Well, I-I ... it was...." Winifred faltered in her attempt to explain and panic crossed over her features as she trailed off to a stop, prompting Leahaven into action.

"Indeed, yes. Lady Winifred here was quite incapacitated from something that hit her eye in the crowd. So I brought her out into the open for a better look." The lie slipped from his mouth with ease and honey as he added a contrite smile for good measure.

Lady Samford's gaze softened for a moment, then hardened in suspicion, her gaze slicing toward Winifred. "Is this true, Winnie?"

Her mouth dropped open then snapped shut. "Of--of course, mother."

The Countess' lips pursed as though she sensed there was something more, but she relented. She hooked her arm around Winifred's, drawing her daughter into her side like an overprotective hen. Lady Samford's suspicious gaze turned to him. "Who is this gentleman?"

Ransom bowed over the older woman's hand, and Winifred introduced him. Her eyes lit up at the mention of his title. "My lord, I did not realize. Please, accept my apologies."

Ah, this boded well for him. The mother was eager for his attention, bringing him that much closer to his goal. He proffered a charismatic smile, his attention sliding over to the horses as they trotted off to the starting line a little more than a mile away. His intention had been to participate in the race, but now he found himself overcome by a strange reluctance. He turned back to the two women.

"Shall I escort you ladies about the field?" he asked with a gallant sweep of his arm.

Lady Samford beamed at his offer. Her eyes flicked to Winifred's equally pleased expression, but then her attention flittered over to the crowd. Her body stiffened at something in the distance, and her beaming smile disappeared into a thin line. "I am afraid not. We are required elsewhere." And without further ado she turned and left.

Ransom was quite dumbfounded as he stared after them.

His speculative gaze ran over the field in search of what had disturbed Lady Samford and found nothing untoward. Battling with his compulsion to follow them, he remained where he stood, weighing up today's events and judging his next move.

The natural sway of Lady Winifred's hips as she walked across the field sent an odd sensation through his body. Delectable. He scowled at the rogue word that came to mind. His little pigeon glanced over her shoulder at him, and he molded his expression into one of seductive charm. His lips tilted at an angle and he winked, slowly.

Her mouth dropped open, and her head snapped away from him. Ransom chuckled as he slid his hands into his pockets and walked away, a whistle forming on his lips. He loved her innocence and naiveté. Indeed, he looked forward to seeing her again.

\* \* \* \*

"Hmm, sounds as though that was blind luck on your part," Anterton said, lifting his port to his lips.

Leaning back in his seat in the corner of White's, Ransom shrugged. "Call it what you will, the outcome will be the same."

Chuckling, Anterton slung an arm over the back of his chair. "Is this what you wanted to drag me to Whites for? I had plans."

"Tell me, have you heard of Lady Maypin's house party? Are you attending this soirée?"

"I am. I received my invite a week ago."

Nodding, Ransom drank his brandy. He didn't relish the idea of spending the whole week among peers that avoided him. "How is it that you have received an invite? I must say, I'm quite surprised at Lady Maypin."

Anterton lifted his glass in mock salute. "I do believe she is trying to marry off her daughter. And now you have joined the elite group as a candidate."

"Are you considering the chit?" he asked with an upturned brow.

He reeled back at the question. "Heavens, no! The Maypin family has an estate that I'd like to take off their hands. Of course, it may take a bit of convincing for them to relinquish it."

"You could just marry the chit. That will certainly solve your problem."

"I'm not that far gone."

Chuckling, Leahaven leaned back in his seat. "Are you that intent on acquiring a heap of bricks?"

Anterton scowled. "I'll have you know that estate is more than just a heap of

bricks.”

Ransom raised a brow in query. His friend didn't often display agitation. “So tell me then, what is so important about this ... estate?”

His eyes became shuttered and he raised his drink to his lips. “I find myself compelled to acquire it.”

Choosing to let the subject lie, he changed the topic. “How is it you know about these ladies? Lady Winifred, now Lady Cecilia?”

“I am a Marquis,” Anterton announced with a wry twist to his lips. “And a wealthy one at that. Mothers would forgive me my ... association for the chance that I would marry their daughter.”

“I don't envy you.” He paused. “What dreaded event has Carlyle got us into tonight?”

“Lady Witherspoon's ball.”

Leahaven repressed a groan. That woman only threw soirées to sniff out scandal. He suspected he had been sent an invitation. Had he accepted? He had a sick feeling that he had indeed done that. It was that damnable promise he made to Carlyle! “There is no way out of this mess is there?”

Anterton's eyes twinkled with mirth. “No. I wouldn't think you would mind too much, as Lady Winifred will be attending.”

His interest perked at the news. “Indeed? How is it you know all these things?”

“Apart from being welcomed by mothers, it would seem Lord Samford does not object to any ... interest I may have in his daughter.”

“I thought he only wished her to marry a duke.”

“Some distant relative of mine is a duke and has no heir. It would seem I might well inherit a dukedom.”

Ransom's eyes widened in surprise. “A duchy? Not only will gels be falling at your feet because of your good looks and wealth, but also because of your title,” he said, raising his glass.

Anterton scowled at his words. “It's not something I wished for.”

“Hmm.” He flicked an imaginary piece of dust off his sleeve. “Life is hard sometimes,” Ransom said, his tone sprinkled with sarcasm.

Anterton's glass paused midway to his mouth as his gaze burnt into Leahaven. “Is there something amiss?”

Ransom paused. Something did bother him. The anniversary of his father's death. In less than a month, it would be a year since he found his father hanging from the rafters. “Nothing at all. Just a little tired, I suppose.”

Anterton's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing. A stiff silence settled over the table.

“Damn it,” Ransom mumbled, pushing to his feet. He shouldn't have let his emotions gain the upper hand. It never boded well for him. Agitated, he ran a rough hand through his hair and glanced at Anterton, who regarded him with mild curiosity. The fool knew what had him bothered. “I'm leaving.”

“I shall accompany you.”

He held up his hand. “No. I prefer to be alone right now.”

Moving away from the table, he pushed through the door and into the street beyond. He stared up at the clouds hovering in the night sky and cursed the day he'd

been handed the title of Earl. Groaning, he turned and walked down the street, his strides purposeful, yet having no real direction. He only wanted to close off his memories, the flood of emotions that threatened to overcome him. The rage.

"Looking for some company, luv?"

He looked up to find a doxy standing in the shadows of an alleyway. What the devil was she doing in this part of London? Passing a cursory glance around him, he eyed her for a moment and weighed up the situation. He graced her with charming grin. "Why, yes. Yes, I am."

The ladybird smiled and lifted one smooth shoulder and gave him a come-hither look; her hand rose to bend her index finger in a luring motion. He chuckled at her, his instincts screaming for caution, but followed nonetheless. He had taken no more than ten strides into the shadows when a large man emerged from the darkness. Dressed in tattered clothing, his oily hair reflected what little light danced against the walls. Ransom surmised that this was a planned attack.

"Give me yer blunt," the giant grunted.

Ransom laughed and the cove reeled under the maniacal sound. Blunt? He had none to even support himself, let alone a lowly thief with an income less than a monkey's allowance.

"Didn't ye hear me? Give me yer blunt!" the man demanded.

Taking a step back, he grinned holding his hands palm up. "Sorry, chap, but I don't have anything."

The man's eyes flickered around him, uncertainty creasing his brow. His mouth thinned, his dark eyes piercing into Ransom. "What you take me for? I ain't no chucklehead. Give me yer money, or I'll take it from ye."

"Do what you must," he said, unconcerned. "But do be quick about it. I have plans for this evening."

Taking a threatening step forward, the would-be thief held up his beefy fists, his eyes narrowed. Assessing the situation, Ransom spread his feet and kept to his toes, his amused facade hiding the tension beneath as he relaxed his body. The giant's shoulder dropped, and Leahaven dodged the blow that followed, and the felon's fist missed him by a mere inch. The knave threw another punch, then several combinations that all missed their marks.

He chuckled at the poor man's skills as a fighter, and in response the man released a monstrous growl and threw numerous jabs until a solid cuff managed to clip the side of his face. Reeling under the force of the blow, Ransom made a quick re-evaluation of his position and decided to end this fight posthaste.

The ruffian dove for him; his large frame hit Ransom in the midriff, tumbling them back into the wall behind. Gasping as he hit the hard brick, Leahaven lifted his knee and rammed it into the man's belly with vicious precision, and a grunt of pain exploded from his attacker. Doubling his fist, he brought it down on the back of the fellow's neck.

The grip the dromedary had on him loosened enough for him to push his assailant back. The giant stumbled away, his eyes rolling from the blow. Taking a step forward, Ransom drew back his fist and punched him. The sound of crunching bone and howl of pain signified that he had broken the fool's nose.

Stumbling back, his hands over his face, the man landed hard on his backside,

moaning in pain. "Ye ... ye broke my nose," he whined.

Ransom stepped closer, unsympathetic as he looked down at his injured opponent. "Be glad that's all I did. Oh, and this also," he said, and with that he kicked the man square in the face, his head snapping back as he fell into unconsciousness.

He turned away, and with a jaunty whistle he walked out of the alley. Movement in his peripheral vision caused him to pause mid-stride, and his eyes fell on the doxy cowering in the shadows. When he faced her, her arms rose in a defensive manner.

"Please, sir, don't hurt me! I was only doing wot he told me," she whimpered.

She was a small thing, her attractiveness hidden behind her threadbare clothes and disheveled appearance. Her dark locks fell over her shoulders in wild curls. How long had it been since she had a meal? "My dear, you have nothing to fear from me," he said, holding out his hand.

She dropped her hands and stared at him with wide brown eyes jaded by life, her lips trembling. "What are ye going to do?"

"Nothing. I am only after your time."

Confused, she glanced down at her unconscious partner. "I thought ye had no money."

"I don't. But I'm sure I can make it worth your time," he said with a soft smile.

She seemed to falter for a moment, but then a smile broke over her features. Yes, this type of diversion was what he needed.

\* \* \* \*

Lady Witherspoon's Assembly room was filled with guests when he arrived. Slipping through the throng, he scanned the surroundings, the midnight velvet curtains catching his attention for a moment. He glanced down at his own dark blue jacket. It amused him that his clothes matched the color scheme of the room, with the beige walls and white accents.

Chuckling, he turned and made a quick search of the balconies. It didn't surprise him that Anterton and Carlyle were looking over the crowd from the gallery. Pushing through the mass of people, he made slow progress to the stairs and quickly bounded up the steps. Upon reaching the top floor, his friends turned as he approached them.

"Where have you been?" Simon asked.

"Busy," he said, his tone abrupt.

Anterton raised a brow in response. "Must have been some sport. You have a bruise just near your right eye."

Ransom scowled. "He was lucky."

Anterton chuckled and turned away to scan the crowd below. Stepping forward, Leahaven leaned over the banister to stare at the promenading couples. He needed a distraction, and so looked for Lady Winifred. After a quick search, he found her standing to one side of the great room. She looked quite lovely in a deep burgundy gown cut in the highest fashion, her white-gloved hands clasped before her as she watched the couples dance by her.

Her expression was soft and wistful as she swayed to the rhythm of the music. Pushing off the banister, he stepped back, his regard never leaving her. "If you would excuse me, gentlemen. I do believe I have the next dance reserved."

He made his way down the stairs and weaved through the milling bodies, his attention focused on where she stood. As though sensing his arrival she paused and

turned her head toward him. Her clear eyes widened before she cut her gaze away. Undeterred by her apparent disinterest, he strolled up to her. The stringed orchestra surged and waned through the last stanza. He didn't have much time to convince her to dance.

"My dear, Lady Winifred, I am glad to see you are here. I trust you are well?" he said, reaching for her hand to place an airy kiss over the smooth fabric.

She pulled her fingers from his light grasp; her gaze flickered, her body tense. She snapped her attention back to him. "What are you--what happened to you?" Her eyes widened as her gaze settled on him.

He touched the bruise, the tender skin stinging under the contact. "It's nothing."

She frowned. "It certainly doesn't look like it. Have you had that seen to?"

Ransom grinned, her concern somehow easing some of the heated rage that still clung to him. "I have," he lied. "Never fear. It's but a small scrape."

Those blue incandescent pools of hers traveled over his features, the concern in her visage warming him. "It looks quite angry."

"I could use your tender attentions. My butler wasn't very gentle with me," he said, slipping his fingers over hers and raising her hand to his lips for a kiss.

Her gaze darkened in censure as she pulled her hand from his. "You mustn't say such things to me," she said.

He chuckled, confused by her change in attitude, but determined to remain unmoved by her reproach or the blush that tinged her cheeks a pretty pink. "My dear, be glad that is *all* I say to you."

She turned her head, her eyes flicking over the room, her lips pressed in an attempt to repress a smile. Indeed, that was a good sign. A moment later her grin fell away with a horrified gasp. Curious, he followed her gaze, but found nothing of great importance. What had her acting like a skittish deer?

"You must leave me be."

His eyes widened at her bold rejection, but he covered it with a self-assured smile. "I do believe I have you reserved for the next dance."

"You cannot be serious, my lord," she whispered, mortified.

"Indeed, I am."

She quickly scanned the room again. "You shouldn't have approached me." She moved away from him in a flurry of satin and censure.

Staring after her, a wave of irritation flowed through him and settled in his veins. *What the devil?* Without a moment of contemplation he followed her, intent on capturing her for the next dance. She traveled along the edge of the room, and he maneuvered behind her without being noticed.

The orchestra drew to a close and as the dancers began to exit the floor, he made his move. Catching her by her hand, he pulled her into the center of the room, her gasp of surprise melting into a glare as the music started up once more.

"What are you doing?" she hissed, her eyes wide in dismay.

"I believe this is called the minuet." He smiled and moved back to take his bow.

Her gaze flittered around the room as though to consider her options. For the briefest of moments she appeared to ready herself to leave the floor, but she paused, her attention focused on him.

"Is it so horrid? The thought of dancing with me?" he asked with aplomb, a lop-

sided grin showing his humor.

Her eyes glittered, her lips pursed. "My father is here tonight."

"Ah. I'm afraid you are caught, my dear. It would cause a scene to dance with me or leave the floor. Indeed, the choice is yours which scandal to take. You could either appease your father ... or appease yourself."

She faltered at his words and then--much to his relief--she raised her hand and he assumed his position with delight. Executing the first figure in silence, Ransom inhaled her clean scent of apple and cinnamon. The unique smell affected him in a curious manner, and his heart thumped in his chest with every brush of his hand over her perfumed skin.

"My lord, I think it rag-mannered that you should act so ... discourteously. You have treated me quite shabbily, abandoning all decorum to spend time with me."

He smiled at her words, knowing she had not objected to his attention earlier today. "My flower, I saw you and wished to become better ... acquainted. I fail to see the problem."

She turned her head to look at him, her brow furrowed. "The problem? You have displayed a complete lack of decorum. And don't call me that."

"Call you what, dear heart?"

"That and flower. It makes me quite uncomfortable," she said, her lips pouting in the most sensual way.

He wanted to kiss that bottom lip so much that he missed a step at the thought. Of course, he couldn't win the wager without sharing some type of intimacy, yet he didn't expect it to form out of impulse, rather than calculated precision. The fact that he experienced a heated wave of lust toward her surprised him. He cleared his throat. "Very well, Lady Winifred. I shall attempt to appease your delicate sensibilities."

She snorted at his words, and he chuckled in response. They moved through the figures, executing dips and rises at the appropriate places. "You know, you won't see a farthing. My father will disown me should you have any thought of pursuing me."

He smiled. "I believe I heard you the first time you mentioned it. I am beginning to fear that you do not like my company."

Her attention snapped to him, her air of casualness gone in the face of his words. "Do you not care that my father will disapprove of your suit?"

"My dear, I am not dancing with your money, your father, or anyone else for that matter. I am dancing with you."

Her mouth parted in astonishment, and the need to trace that full bottom lip with his tongue pierced him. He stayed the scowl that would have washed over his features at the thought, and attempted to charm her with a smile. His efforts were rewarded with a blush. A good sign.

"Would you care for a ride through Hyde Park tomorrow?"

She stumbled slightly under his question, but he righted her with ease. "You cannot be serious," she said, her eyes widening in dismay.

He raised a brow at her words. "Is that perhaps a no?"

Her gaze cut away from him in a nervous gesture. "Why are you asking these things?" she asked, a note of despair tinging her voice as she stared at him.

"Does it bother you that I find you intriguing?"

"Yes," she hissed.



He leaned close, his breath moved tendrils of hair near her ear. The scent of her skin intensified and sent anticipation through him. "Is that so," he whispered, and she shivered at his words. "Would it be so horrid, the thought of deepening our ... acquaintance?"

"No--I mean, yes. Pray, desist. You are stepping beyond the bounds of decorum."

He grinned at her words. "Perhaps, I shall call on you."

"No!"

He pulled back at her heated reply. It would seem that Lady Winifred's fear of her father posed a greater problem than he had anticipated. He remained silent as they completed the current figure, his mind searching for a solution. Crying defeat was not an option as his pride demanded he continue on his path. He had to come up with an alternate route to her heart.

"My dear, do you enjoy Hyde Park?"

She glanced at him; confusion and hesitation flickered in her eyes. "Yes."

"I shall be riding along Rotten Row at about nine. Perhaps I shall see you there tomorrow?" He knew it to be a sly maneuver, but he had to see her. This strange compulsion he had ruled over his need to win.

She remained silent at his words, and for a moment he feared she would refuse. "Very well," she murmured.

Relief washed over him at that single word, and he resisted the urge to kiss her fingers then and there. As they completed their last figure, he smiled at her as he led her back to the edge of the room. Making a sweep over her hand, he placed a kiss on her knuckles before rising, a slow smile pulling at his lips as he observed her flustered expression and pink cheeks. Lovely.

"Until tomorrow," he promised, before turning and moving away from her. His first objective was completed.

## Chapter Five

Winifred stared after him for a moment, dazed by the turn of events. She couldn't believe she had danced a minuet. Of course, she could count the amount of times she had been asked to dance on her two hands and this had to be the most ... enjoyable turn on the floor yet. She felt a wave of heat wash through her.

What possessed her to agree to meet him in Hyde Park? Her father would--she gasped, her eyes searching the parameter of the room. She found him storming toward her, his bushy gray brows drawn together in anger. Swallowing hard, she stood her ground, her heart beating in her ears. He pulled to a stop before her, his eyes on the retreating back of the Earl of Leahaven.

"We are leaving now," he said, his tone stiff with censure. "We shall collect your mother and return home."

Without a word she nodded and followed after Lord Samford, not daring to question him. She searched for one last look at Leahaven, but he had disappeared into the crowd. Sighing, she moved through the throng of people, not at all caring that she was leaving the soiree early. Despite that one minuet it would--in all likelihood--be the only twirl she would have around the dance floor. She didn't relish the idea of spending the next few hours standing by the side watching the revelers while she pined for a dance.

They found her mother involved in a game of loo. She sat at a table with six other occupants, her features alight with anticipation. Letting out a cry of joy as she won the hand, she gathered her winnings and dropped them into her reticule. Glancing up, her eyes widened as her attention fell on them.

"Come. We are leaving," her father said sternly.

She could see a flicker of hesitation in her mother's eyes, but Lady Samford stood and left the game, her mouth set in a pout. They walked in silence out of the house and into the carriage. The silence in the cabin was grim, as the post chaise trundled down the street. Her mother fidgeted with her bag, her gaze never leaving her lap.

Across from her, Winifred could feel his burning stare, his irises black in the darkness.

"Who was that gentleman?"

Winifred jerked at his words, fear running like ice through her veins.

"Who was who?" Lady Samford asked, her attention lifting from her lap.

"Winifred here danced with some gentleman tonight," he said.

Her mother gasped and her hand fluttered to her lips in delight. "You did?" Her attention turned to Winifred. "How wonderful!"

"It's *not* wonderful," admonished Lord Samford, his brow pulled down in warning. "I know that gentleman is not one of the dukes I have chosen for you to associate with. Now I demand to know who he is."

She trembled under his regard, her stomach roiling at his dark gaze. His brows drew together, making him appear all the more forbidding. "The Earl of Leahaven."

He stared at her for a long moment. "That name sounds familiar...."

She sat, waiting in tense silence. His attention focused on her with such intensity that her tongue froze over. Swallowing at the lump in her throat, her lip trembled from the anxiety that permeated the air. "I--" He held up a hand, forestalling her half-formed explanation

Her father assumed an air of authority, his blue gaze snapping. "I forbid you to dance with that man again."

"Father, I didn't--"

His lips pursed in a way that cautioned her to keep her silence. "I don't want to hear it. His reputation alone should ensure you steer clear of him."

She nodded, her eyes averted. "Yes, Father," she whispered.

He folded his arms over his chest with a satisfied "harrumph". She never had the courage to talk her father down or explain herself. She tried to turn away his continual disappointment in her by remaining as docile as she could.

She felt a gentle hand on her forearm and turned to stare into her mother's sympathetic gaze. Tapping her forearm once more for reassurance, Winifred cast her attention out the window. The silence in the carriage thickened under her father's steady regard.

She had never gone against his wishes before. Tomorrow morning she would play with fire and meet a known rake. The thought both titillated and terrified her. She had never experienced the interest of a genuine gentleman, only the occasional attentions of fortune hunters.

She recalled the dance, how close he stood, the smell of fresh soap as he leaned into her. His warm breath ... She shivered as a wave of heat tingled along the soles of her feet and rushed over her body, warming her cheeks. Thankful for the darkness, she shifted in her seat, passing a quick glance at her father who stared at her for a moment.

She held still, her heart thumping in her chest, afraid that he would know that she entertained indecent thoughts. She gulped at the panic that rose up like a burning sensation in her throat. With another *harrumph* he turned his attention out the window. A small sigh escaped her as tension drained out of her and was replaced with a strange sense of excitement that left her feeling quite flushed. She would do it. She would see him tomorrow....

\* \* \* \*

The sunlight that filtered through the thick burgundy curtains of her room woke Winifred from her slumber. She smiled as she stretched, still caught in the throes of a dream that involved a white steed and Lord Leahaven in shining--her eyes snapped open. Lord Leahaven! She rolled out of bed and pushed the curtains aside to stare over the cobblestone street below. The number of people in the street indicated the day had started. She hummed a buoyant tune as she twirled around the room, pretending she was held in Leahaven's arms once more.

The door cracked open and Winifred came to an abrupt halt. Straightening her back, she stared at the entrance, squelching the embarrassment that pulled at her composure with hot fingers. Mary faltered to a stop as she passed the threshold, her eyes wide with amazement. "Good ... good morning, my lady. You're up early."

Winifred shifted from foot to foot, glad for the long nightdress that covered her. Indeed, it was not often she rose before Mary arrived and even less often that she swung around the room like some ninny. "Uh, yes." She smoothed her hand over the white

fabric

With a nod, her abigail came further in the room and pushed the curtains aside. Light shone through the windows and reflected against the cream walls. Her maid continued on with her morning ritual, showing no indication of what she thought of Winifred twirling about her bedchamber. Sighing, Winnie turned and glanced at herself in the mirror. Goodness! She looked frightful.

Running a hand over locks that hung in wild disarray, she pursed her lips in annoyance. She needed her hair prepared to perfection today. A gown of the highest mode to impress her new ... she paused. What could she call him? She would never dare call him a suitor. Her father would send her back to the country--right after he met Leahaven on the field of honor.

She glanced over her shoulder at Mary. "I think it a fine day for a ride through Hyde Park, don't you?"

Mary looked up from her task of rearranging the room; her brown eyes stared at her for a moment then flicked around the room as though the answer lay on the walls. "You don't usually go out in the mornings. You're in good spirits this morning, my lady."

Her heart sank in disappointment. It wasn't at all the answer she hoped for, but she didn't need her maid's consent. She lifted one shoulder in a shrug, attempting to appear casual at her unusual request. Indeed, she never ventured out to Hyde Park--or anywhere else during the day, for that matter. "I thought it time for a change. I shall wear my blue habit today."

Mary nodded and moved to retrieve the gown. The dress of velvet shimmered in varying shades of indigo, the high neck and smooth sleeves graced by white lace. Running a finger over the fine fabric, Winifred smiled, anticipation sending prickles of delight through her.

"Hurry! I wish to be at the Park soon."

They made quick work of dressing, her corset pulled tight to accentuate her waist and push her ... other attributes out. She stood back and assessed the gown. It looked wonderful. The soft fabric settled over her body to perfection, the cut of the dress slimming her appearance. Her mother had purchased this riding habit for her, insisting it would fit her figure well. She was right.

Mary handed her the matching bonnet. The blue feather bobbed as the hat was fitted to her head. Satisfied with her appearance she turned to Mary. "I require you to accompany me. I refuse to allow a footman to escort me."

Her maid's eyes widened, but she said not a word as she nodded and left the room. With a final glance, Winifred felt satisfied with her appearance and walked down stairs. Her father sat in the morning room. He glanced up from his morning paper to stare at her as she entered, his cold blue eyes narrowed at her emergence. She never rose early enough to have breakfast with him, and she knew that cast immediate suspicion on her.

"What are you doing up so early?"

She swallowed hard, anxiety stabbing at her short-lived determination. "I ... I thought to go for a ride."

His frown cleared as he folded the paper and dropped it on the table. He indicated one of the chairs. "Care to have a seat?"

Hesitating for but a split second, she perched herself on the cushioned seat, her eyes flicking over the smooth rosewood table, green wallpaper and matching curtains. She refused to look at him, worried that he might already suspect she was up to something. She swallowed hard, and the butterflies that had taken residence in her stomach subsided into slight nausea.

“You do understand what we discussed last night?”

Everything within her stilled, and she nodded, her body tense with dread.

From her peripheral vision she watched him lean back with a sigh of satisfaction.

“Good.”

She passed a quick glance at him and then cut away, afraid he would read her intentions should she stare at him for too long. “Is that all, papa?”

He remained silent. “Yes.”

Stifling the sigh of relief that threatened to slip through her lips, she cleared her throat with a discreet cough. “Well, I must be off.” She stood.

He frowned at her. “Are you not going to have something to eat?”

Her stomach lurched at the idea of food. Winifred shook her head and repressed a grimace. “No. I’m not hungry.”

His gaze narrowed on her and she held her ground while her mind urged her to flee. He could prevent her from stepping out with but one word. “Very well.”

Relief washed through her, draining the tension from her body and weakening her knees. Her father picked up the paper and flicked it open before him; the conversation was closed. He didn’t press her for an explanation for her unusual behavior and for that she was thankful. She could never lie to him when pressured so. She mumbled her farewells and turned to walk from the room to find Mary standing beyond the entranceway, her eyes wide with curiosity. “Charles will bring the horses around,” she said.

Winifred faltered in her stride. She had forgotten that the servants needed to be informed of her intentions. Never had she ventured out on horseback and never without her parents. Embarrassed by her lack of foresight, she murmured her thanks and walked out the front door. The move from dark to light hurt her eyes, and she squinted until everything came into focus.

A manservant stood out front holding the reins of two fine chestnut thoroughbreds. His curious gaze fell on Winifred as she approached. After selecting a mare, she mounted with the assistance of the footman. Collecting the reins, she thanked him and urged the horse into a canter.

She passed hawkers and elegant carriages as she maneuvered her horse through the traffic. As they drew closer to Hyde Park, her heart rate picked up in anticipation, but she stifled it with logic.

He was the first gentleman to claim any interest in her beyond her money, and it would benefit her to protect her heart from harm and keep him at a distance. She resisted the inclination to snort. Riding toward Hyde Park for a rendezvous contradicted her determination.

The park came into sight, and a tingle of trepidation trickled through her. The fear of venturing into the unknown made her hesitate as she drew the horse to a halt before the entrance. Chewing on her lip, she stared at the landscape beyond. A smooth breeze shifted the branches, and they waved as though urging her to enter. She stood on

the precipice of no return; she could return home or continue on.

Propelling her mount forward, she cantered through the park. Her gaze traveled over the curricles and mounted gentlemen that trotted along Rotten Row. Slowing the pace of her mare to a walk, she rocked to and fro as they moved through the Park at a languorous pace. After twenty minutes of circling the park, she shifted in her seat and stared over the grounds. A tendril of uncertainty went through her as she worried her bottom lip. How would she be able to spot him when so many enjoyed the landscape?

"Is something amiss, my lady?"

She glanced over at Mary's concerned visage and eyes wide with curiosity. "Nothing at all," she mumbled, though she couldn't help her disappointment as she ardently searched the grounds. "Perhaps one more canter through, then we shall head home."

Mary concurred, and Winifred urged her mount forward, a bitter taste in her mouth as she weaved through the multitudes. Moving further from the entrance, the crowd lessened as she traveled along the Serpentine. She breathed a heavy sigh. It would serve her well as a lesson learnt, she mused with a degree of desolation. She had high hopes of today's events that--

"Ho, there!"

Winifred twisted in her saddle to see Leahaven bearing down on them with a fair amount of speed. Her short-lived depression was chased away by fierce delight at his arrival. He looked so handsome, his eager expression lighting up his dark eyes as he approached, his hair waving about in the wind in wild disarray. He drew to a halt beside her, a mischievous grin pulling at his lips.

"Good day," she said, her tone flat as she tried to squelch the pleasure that warmed her body.

His expression turned contrite, a small frown drawing his brows together. "I apologize for my tardiness, but I was detained by something that was simply unavoidable."

She raised an indifferent shoulder in an attempt to appear unmoved by his explanation. "It matters little. Mary and I were having quite a leisurely ride through the park. I hardly noticed."

His gaze ran over her maid as he tipped his head in greeting, then settled on her as though he could see beyond her façade and into the vulnerability that she tried so hard to conceal. He smiled. "It was quite rag-mannered of me, wasn't it? Never fear, it shall never happen again."

His obvious attempt to sooth her ruffled feathers wasn't lost on her, and she released a very unladylike snort in response. "Indeed," she said, her voice laced with sarcasm.

"I shall endeavor to make it up to you. Perhaps a bouquet of roses?"

"No!"

His frown deepened at her heated reply. "Whyever not? I thought all ladies enjoyed a beautiful bouquet."

"I do ... It's just ... just...."

His expression cleared as understanding dawned. "Ah, your father. I have heard he wishes you to marry a duke. And he would hardly approve of knowing you spent time with me, a mere Earl. Very well, your secret shall remain safe."

"It's hardly safe. These people are bound to see us together," she pointed out with a touch of ire.

He grinned at her words, unaware of her battle to remain unperturbed. "Everyone rides out in Hyde Park, my dear. It's merely fate that you happened to be here at the same time as me."

His brows waggled, and she pursed her lips together to stifle a smile. He was incorrigible. Then she noticed something odd about him that gave her pause. His eyes twinkled, but everything about him appeared strained.

Her humor faded into concern when she noticed the fine sweat that marked his brow, the grin that seemed somewhat forced as they both trotted along Rotten Row. His usual carefree grace had been replaced with stiffness. Her unease deepened when a spot appeared on the sleeve of his buff suit and spread out, the dark crimson sending a shaft of fear through her.

She pulled her horse to a halt, her gaze fixated on the steadily increasing stain that traveled up his forearm. "My goodness! You are bleeding."

He seemed startled by her proclamation and stopped to look down in a rather dazed fashion at his arm. "Indeed, it does look that way."

Winifred's mouth dropped open at his reply. They could have been talking of the weather. Did the man not know that he was injured? "Come," she said, urging her mount forward. "We shall have that tended to."

"No, no. It's quite all right, I assure you."

Glowing over her shoulder and pursing her lips, she said, "I shan't have you bleeding to death in the middle of the Park. Come, it's but a few meters off the track."

Conceding to her wishes, he steered his horse after her as they weaved through the lines of trees, the leaves waving in the wind as she ducked a few low hanging branches until she found an area that met her criteria. Sliding off her mount, she turned to Mary, who also dismounted and approached her. "My lady, I simply cannot allow you to be alone with this man. It is immoral and should Lord Samford find out--"

"You're not going to tell father are you?"

Mary paused at her words. "No, m'lady. But--"

Winifred grabbed her abigail's raised hand, squeezing to signal her gratitude. "I shall not let father know either," she whispered, knowing that should he catch wind of this Mary could very well lose her position, and she couldn't have that happen.

"What is all this whispering about? Dare I hope it is about me?"

Winifred glanced over her shoulder to find that Leahaven had dismounted and stood behind her, his face showing his strain. He took a step toward her but faltered, a shaky hand rising to his forehead as he stepped sideways. Coming to instant alertness, she immediately lurched to his aid, her hand grasping his elbow while Mary lunged to capture the other.

"Terribly sorry," he mumbled as they led him to the nearest tree and settled him against it. "I don't know what's wrong with me. How very ungallant of me."

She glanced over his head at Mary's wide-eyed expression. He slurred his words and seemed to be struggling to remain conscious. Kneeling beside him in the moist earth, uncaring that her dress might be stained, she moved aside a lock of hair from his face to view his pale features. "Please remove your jacket."

He dull eyes twinkled at her words as his lips quirked in a lop-sided grin. "It's

not often I hear that from such a fine young woman as yourself. Very well, I shall comply.”

He moved to ease his arms out of his coat, but even that proved a struggle as his grunted and strained in an unsuccessful attempt to free himself.

“Mary, I need your help,” Winfred ordered, her hand resting on his chest to stay him. “We need to get him out of this.”

Her maid nodded, chewing her lower lip as she assisted Winfred to undress him, revealing a fine cream vest and lawn shirt stained with blood.

Winfred eased before him to get a better view. The cloth lay heavy with blood, his pale fingers attesting to the lack of circulation as they lay limp in her grasp. Unhooking the button on the cuff of his left arm, she rolled back the fabric and gasped at the crimson-soaked bandage wrapped around his arm.

“How did this happen?” she asked, mortified.

His grin became a grimace as he pulled his hand from her grasp. “It’s nothing really. It’s only but a scratch.”

Winfred snatched his arm back, ignoring his hiss of pain. “It looks nothing of the sort. Have you had this tended to?”

“I have not.”

Letting out an exasperated breath at his stubbornness, she retrieved her kerchief from her reticule and began to undo the cloth covering his forearm that looked strangely like a cravat. Odd, since he still wore his.

Pulling the soaked bandage free she hissed at the deep cut. Stained red from the seeping blood, his skin opened in a gash that ran far too deep to be considered a mere scratch. Dropping her kerchief over the wound, she applied pressure with one hand as she wound it tight around his arm. Biting her lower lip, she drew it into a secure knot, silently thanking Mr. William for showing her how to deal with wounds on animals when she was a child.

Chewing her bottom lip in contemplation, she glanced at Mary. “We should take him to a physician.”

“No, no, I’m quite all right,” Ransom said. “Be right as rain in a moment. Just have to wait until the world stops spinning.”

She stared at his slightly disheveled appearance; a fine sweat marked his brow as he peered up at her through heavy-lidded eyes. “You are in no position to naysay me, sir. You are injured and that ... thing you call a bandage wasn’t wrapped around you well enough to do you any good.”

“Well, it is slightly awkward trying to tie one’s wound by oneself.”

Her eyes narrowed on him as he tipped his head back, his head hitting the trunk with a dull thump. “Wound? How did get such an injury?”

“Dueling,” he mumbled, his eyes sliding shut.

“Dueling!”

He opened his eyes to peer at her. “It was hardly my fault,” he said, his tone turning petulant. “The fool demanded satisfaction over something I wasn’t accountable for. I was hardly going to allow him to besmirch my name. My honor demanded it.”

Winfred rolled her eyes. “So you would risk life and limb for honor?”

“When I am not at fault. Certainly!”

It was the first time he’d shown a bit of energy over a topic since this whole



affair, and it was an encouraging sign. Perhaps all he needed was a bit of rest and his injury wound tightly to stem the flow of blood. He remained silent as she folded his coat and rested it behind his head, his sigh of contentment sending pleasure through her until it was sliced off with a thought. "Is this the reason you were late?"

He peeked at her through one eye. "Would it upset you if I said yes?"

Winifred glowered, furious that he had risked his life for *honor* and also somewhat hurt by it. "That is thoroughly ridiculous," she huffed, leaning back on her heels. "So did your promise to me mean nothing?"

He shifted against the tree and looked up at her, a concerned frown pulling at his brow. "My dear, I have hurt you. It was not my intent."

She jerked her hand away from him when he would've taken it in his hand, and crossed her arms about her chest to give him a fierce look. "As a *gentleman* I expected you to at least put your priorities in order."

His concern melted into laughter, and Winifred felt the sudden compulsion to swat him. Indeed, it was rather unladylike of her to entertain such notions, but his good-humor grated on her so. "Oh, stop it!" she admonished.

"My flower, I do adore your fiery temper," he said through chuckles.

"Well, I never! Come, Mary, we are leaving."

His hand shot out with surprising alacrity and grasped her wrist. "Pray, wait for but a moment. I adore your liveliness. I did not mean to insult. You're quite refreshing, and I find it all rather disquieting."

Winifred frown and stared into his lucid eyes. Disquieting? What a strange word to use. Taking a calming breath as his grip eased on her wrist, she stared at the horses and carriages that traversed Rotten Row in the distance; the muffled sound of their passing adding a sense of alarm to her situation. For moment she had forgotten about the consequences of her actions in her concern for Ransom.

Worrying her lower lip, she glanced down at his now limp form. Fearful that he'd lost consciousness she touched his shoulder, surprised to find his uninjured arm rise and encase hers, pressing her fingers against his hard shoulder, the heat of his skin penetrating hers. While his eyes remained shut, a small smile graced his lips and an expression akin to contentment washed over his features. Uncertain and a bit reluctant to pull away, she battled with her yearning heart and her common sense, a fierce battle that yielded no victor as she remained as she was, still and forever remaining indecisive.

"M'lady." Mary's voice jerked her out of her ruminations. "We must return home."

She sighed and eased her hand from his grasp, her fingers tingling as they slid along the smooth fabric. His eyes opened, and regret was etched on his features as his lips curled in a wry grin. "Indeed, she may well be correct. I, too, need to see a physician."

Winifred stood and offered her hand to assist him, hooking her arm around his shoulder as he rose with a groan. "Are you certain you don't require assistance?"

His smile was soft as he looked down at her, his gaze holding a wealth of meaning, and before she knew what he was about his lips encompassed her in a brief yet moving kiss. His warm lips pressed against hers, his tongue sliding against the inside of her lips before pulling away and leaving her incapable of thought. "I am thankful for the offer, but I do believe I can see myself safely home."

With that he sauntered over to his horse with a new vivaciousness to his step and mounted, his moan signifying he hadn't quite recovered as he settled in his seat. Tipping his head at them he kicked his gelding forward and trotted back to Rotten Row, merging into the crowd.

Touching her trembling fingers to her tender lips, she stared ahead at nothing in particular, unable to believe what had happened. He'd kissed her. Her first kiss and it was by a man who by all accounts appeared to be off his horse. She giggled and smothered it as she looked over at her glowering maid. Though she felt Mary's censure it did nothing to stifle the joy that flushed through her body. Indeed, he was no duke, but he was certainly Prince Charming.

## Chapter Six

The Maypin country home was a sprawling estate. In the dim twilight, Ransom was able to see the vast grounds from his window in his appointed bedchamber. Soon he would head down and begin the serious seduction of Lady Winifred. The thought filled him with unfamiliar pleasure, his heart picking up pace at the mere thought of her.

His smile withered into a frown as he recalled the incident in Hyde Park. He'd kissed her with no compunction or forethought. No calculated maneuver. The feeling of her soft lips against his set off something in him that he was unfamiliar with.

She'd tasted sweet, like fresh honeydew, her innocence an essence he had yet to capture. Astounded by the way she moved him, he was determined to have her. He had yet to inform Anterton that the bet was off, but only Winifred mattered to him now.

He flexed his wrist, his muscles groaning in protest with the movement. The twinge of pain reminded him of his ill-fated duel. His newfound joy turned grim. Lord Dawler would now think twice before spouting off wild accusations about Ransom and his wife. Leahaven had tugged quite a few wives in the past, but never had he entertained the notion of Lady Dawler, though he didn't miss her obvious messages.

Letting out a disgusted breath, he turned to survey the room. The blue and white striped wallpaper made the chamber feel somewhat morose. The lush white bedding and fine furniture were a luxury he had long ago dispersed with under the strain of financial ruin. Indeed, the majority of his clothes were frayed and worn, and he didn't know how long he could keep up this charade.

Sighing, he rubbed his forehead in agitation, and focused his attention on something far more enlivening. His romance of Winifred seemed to be just the right distraction as he found himself planning his next move to win her heart.

\* \* \* \*

He arrived precisely at seven for supper in the drawing room, dressed to the nines in a black on black ensemble. He had spent a good half hour deciding what to wear and gave a wry grin at the thought. That was a new experience for him. When the formal Maypin butler announced him, he adjusted his gloves around his fingers and entered the room.

Lady Winifred was already there. At least something would come out of this meal. She sat on a chaise lounge wearing an elegant, pale-blue gown, the color setting off her alabaster skin and silky hair. She and her mother both looked up upon his entry, Winifred with wide-eyed nervousness and her mother with mild curiosity.

"My lord." He turned to observe Lady Maypin approach him. "I am so glad you have arrived. Pray, would you care to sit?"

Bowing, he bestowed a charming smile at the hostess. "Thank you."

Lady Maypin led him to the settee near Winifred. He sat next to Lady Cecilia, her brown eyes lighting on him with adoration. Beside him in an armchair was another gentleman, his brown hair peppered with gray. His bushy eyebrows drew together as introductions were made.

"Quincy?" He harrumphed. "That name sounds familiar. Tell me, are you related to Arnold Quincy?"

He stared at the man for a moment, weighing up his answer. "He was my father." If it were possible, those bushy brows drew down that much more. The gentleman was not at all impressed with his relation to such a man. But he couldn't blame him. Not many people liked his father's boisterous ways and drunken fits of rage.

Lord "Toplofty" eased back in his seat, his fingers forming temples as he pressed them together, regarding Ransom. He had been weighed and found unworthy. "Indeed."

That one word was uttered in a way that it acted like a slap to the face. He gave a cocksure grin, unable to still the stubborn will that came to the fore. Who was this man to judge him so?

"Indeed, I am." He lounged back on his seat and crossed his leg, a brow rising in query, challenging him to say more.

The man harrumphed again, but turned his attention elsewhere. Thankful that the man chose to abandon his self-assured superiority, Ransom focused on the task at hand. An intimate meal with both Lady Cecilia and Lady Winifred would do nothing but increase his chances of winning his ladylove.

"Lady Cecilia, I trust you are feeling better?"

Brown eyes widened behind spectacles. "Yes. I am quite recovered."

He nodded, his eyes flicking over to Winifred, who seemed involved in a conversation with her mother. "I trust you were not taken ill after the incident at Montagu House."

Lady Cecilia shook her head. "No. Your letter and flowers were welcome. I was unable to send you my thanks as you didn't supply an address."

Ransom quelled the impulse to grimace and smiled, hiding his frustration at the fact that his residence relied on the charity of his friendship with Lord Anterton. "No need, my lady. Your smile is enough."

She tilted her chin downward, a small, self-conscious smile raising the corner of her lips. "You are too kind."

He leaned back on the settee, a lazy smile pulling at his lips. Noticing that Winifred watched him from the corner of her eye, he tried to think of a witty remark, but Lady Maypin beat him to it as she stood and rushed across the room.

"Ah, our final guest has arrived," she announced. "We may walk in to supper."

Glancing up he found Carlyle and Anterton standing just beyond the entrance. Carlyle's eyes widened upon sighting Leahaven reclined on the settee. Ransom pursed his lips, stifling an amused chuckle as they were led into the room. It would appear that Simon hadn't expected to find him at the Maypin Estate.

Chuckling, he stood and cocked his elbow for the particular lady he was to see from the room, a young woman of means with a fine teal dress and an elegant coiffeur. She looked up at him and tittered, a shrill giggle that made him cringe, yet he covered it well with a charming smile that prompted a blush to sweep across her cheeks.

"Shall we, Lady Christine?"

She slipped her hand through his, and they sauntered from the room and into an elegant dining room. The silver candelabras stood high, lighting the room in warm contrast to the cool beige walls of the large dining room. Without a word, Ransom led his partner to her chair and seated her. Pulling out his own chair, his eyes immediately

sought out Winifred, who was seated closer to the head of the table and next to none other than Lord Anterton.

Their eyes met and held, the air sizzling with tension until she turned her gaze from him, her cheeks darkening to a delightful shade of pink. He smiled softly but froze upon catching Anterton's attention. His friend's eyes glittered with mirth as he seated himself. What the devil was he up to?

Attempting to appear unperturbed, he leaned back in his seat and turned to the young woman on his right to listen to her prattle on about her new gloves while his gaze kept shifting back to Winifred.

Winifred stared intently down at her plate, refusing to look up and confirm what she already knew. He was looking at her. Shifting the soup around the bowl, she noticed her trembling fingers and clenched them around her utensil.

"Is something amiss?"

She glanced at Lord Anterton, his blue eyes twinkling with humor. Licking her lips, she passed another compulsive glance at Leahaven to find him smiling and conversing with the woman next to him. Unable to quell the jealousy that surged through her, she attempted a smile, though she was sure it came out as a grimace.

"Nothing is the matter, my lord. I trust you are enjoying your soup?"

He nodded. "Indeed, I am. You have yet to touch yours."

Winifred glanced down at the creamy liquid and absently turned her spoon in it. It was unusual for her not to enjoy the fare, but her hunger had abandoned her. "I find I have little appetite of late," she mumbled.

"Could it be attributed to Lord Leahaven?"

She gaze shot to him, then to her father who remained ensconced in a conversation about politics. Drawing in a breath, she faced Anterton, whose features were set in firm, serious lines. "Why ever would you think that?"

He shot a glance over at his friend, and she noted that this time, Ransom was indeed watching, a fine line pulling at his brow.

Clearing his throat, Anterton turned his attention back to her, a smile tilting his lips, his good-humor not reaching his eyes as they remained serious. "I've noticed the way you have been looking at him."

She wanted to scoff at his words, but she knew that she couldn't. He would see right through her denial and into the truth beyond her words, so she chose to remain silent.

"It's my understanding that your father wishes you to marry ... well. He is but an Earl, and you, a Marquis's daughter."

She drew in another calming breath, her hand stilling over her soup as she batted her eyes at him. It was better than rolling them, which was what she wanted to do. "Your interest in my marriage prospects is quite fascinating, my lord. Should I be expecting you to approach my father with your suit?"

Leaning back in his seat he cleared his throat, the message understood. "Lady Winifred, I hold you in the highest esteem, yet I cannot allow you to become attached to ... a philanderer."

Irritation pierced her and heated her cheeks, his concern for her well being not at all appreciated as he defamed his own friend. "My lord, your caution is hardly needed. Indeed, I am surprised that you would speak ill of your friend so, when you do not

possess a pristine background yourself, if the rumors are to be believed.”

He grinned, for the first time showing true humor. “Touché. I see an apology is in order. It’s clear that my assessment of you was incorrect.”

Winifred frowned. Assessment? How odd. She didn’t care a whit that Lord Anterton was due to inherit a dukedom. She found his cold manner distasteful and wouldn’t at all encourage his suit. Her father, on the other hand, had different notions.

Sighing, she turned her attention back to her soup and managed to spoon some in her mouth, the tension gone as she relished the chicken and cream texture. Better she occupy her mouth with food than ask the questions that came to mind.

Throughout the meal she found her gaze drifting often to the seat at the other end of the table. Leahaven’s heated regard sent rivulets of pleasure through her, and she found it difficult to conceal her delight. Stifling the smile that came to her lips, she glanced at her father to find his brows drawn together in censure. Her short-lived pleasure died a quick death as fear sucked the air from her.

Swallowing hard, she turned her regard back to her plate, shifting the food in an attempt to appear preoccupied. It wouldn’t do for her father to know that she entertained romantic thoughts about Ransom. Again she chanced a glance at her father. His regard had turned down the table, and upon sighting Lord Leahaven in the general direction of her gaze, his lips fell into a grim line.

She drew in a harsh breath, waiting for him to pass her the look that told her how displeased he was with her. Her fingers tightened around her utensil involuntarily, a well of panic rising within her. Would he send her back to Samford Park?

She didn’t realize she was holding her breath until her father’s attention was pulled away by the gentleman beside him, and he was drawn into another political debate. With an unsteady hand she spooned some soup into her mouth, thankful for the reprieve.

The meal came to an end none too soon, and Winifred was all too pleased to leave the table. Standing with the women, she shuffled out of the room, not missing Ransom’s intense gaze as she passed him and feeling it follow her as she left.

Cecilia hooked her arm around Winifred, her excitement palpable as she glanced back at the table. “Isn’t he handsome?”

Images of Ransom came to mind, a heated blush sweeping across her cheeks. “Who?”

Her cousin tugged against her elbow. “Lord Townsend.”

Winifred frowned in an attempt to remember what he looked like, but she could see nothing but Ransom’s vivid twilight eyes. “Yes, he is.”

Cecilia giggled as her gloved hand covered her lips, her eyes twinkling with true pleasure. “I’m glad you think so.” She glanced around her before she continued. “I do believe he holds a tendre for me.”

Winifred recalled who he was after running through the list of guests. “I thought he was living on a monkey’s income.”

Her cousin’s lips pursed in annoyance. “That’s but a rumor. Mother would never have invited him if she knew it to be true.”

Relenting, she drew Cecilia in close. “Yes, certainly.”

Entering the drawing room, they both settled on the cream settee, and the other women found a place to sit as they awaited the gentlemen’s attendance.

Pulling in close, Cecilia discreetly glanced around them. “I wouldn’t be opposed

to Lord Leahaven either.”

Her smile turned brittle. “Indeed?”

She tilted one shoulder in a nonchalant shrug. “Well, he is handsome and not at all like I expected him to be.”

Winifred tipped her chin to stare at her hands as she played with the fabric of her dress, torn between logic and her heart. She had no claim on him and it ought not to matter who else found him attractive. She wasn’t the first to find him so.

Cecilia’s hand encompassed hers. “Winnie, whatever is a matter?”

Smiling, she shook her head and looked into her cousin’s concerned visage. “It’s nothing really.”

A knowing twinkle entered her eyes, her lip pursing in a lopsided line. “If you have a bit of a tendre for Lord Leahaven, you only need to tell me,” she whispered.

“I certainly do not,” she lied, yet her heated blush belied her words.

Cecilia giggled. “Have no fear. Shall I find out if he returns the feeling?”

“No!” she said in a harsh whisper. “You know my father would never agree to such a match.”

Cecilia waved her hand and leaned closer still. “Oh, pooh on your father.”

Winifred couldn’t shake the sense of apprehension that filled her at the thought of her father finding out of her dalliance with a man that was thoroughly unsuitable. *Yet oh so handsome*. The rogue thought flittered through her mind and she scowled. She had to remember her responsibilities. The fact that her cousin appeared unmoved by Lord Samford’s attitude left a bitter taste in her mouth, as she was often the one left to face his ire.

“I shall be ever so discreet,” she prompted, touching her nose.

Although she knew how he felt about her, she found herself curious about his intentions. Cautiously scanning the room, she turned back to Cecilia who remained eager to help. “My father will disown me if he ever found out about this.”

“Never fear, Lord Samford will never know anything is afoot.”

\* \* \* \*

The minute the women left the room, Ransom stood and strode over to Anterton, his jealousy cutting into his composure. Watching the two converse during the meal made him feel quite bitter. An unusual heated rage seeped in his bones when she had smiled at the damnable Marquis.

Anterton glanced up at him and leaned back in his seat, a small grin pulling at his lips as he hooked his hands behind his head. The fool knew the reason why Ransom approached him.

“I trust your night has been enjoyable,” Leahaven growled.

Anterton chuckled. “Indeed, it has. I didn’t know Lady Winifred was such a firecracker.”

Ransom scowled. “What did you say to her?”

“Why, nothing. Fearful you will loose your bet?”

“There is no bet,” he said, casting a quick glance around the room. Their interaction was lost on the occupants of the room, as most of the gentlemen were busy talking of politics and smoking fine cigars.

Anterton raised a conceited brow. “Isn’t there? Concede defeat now, and we shall move onto other entertainment.”

"I'm not conceding defeat," he objected. "It's a ridiculous wager and it's time to abandon such frivolity."

"Finally, someone speaking sense," Simon said, having walked up behind them.

Anterton chuckled. "Ever so conservative, Carlyle. Leahaven here is about to give over. Samford's daughter is too much of a challenge for him. Come now, we shall make it more lively. How about we find who will be the first to have a *yea* out of her?"

Ransom's fist clenched and he made no attempt to conceal his fury. "You will not."

"It was just a thought," Anterton said.

Carlyle's questioning gaze fell on Ransom, then darkened with perception. "You be careful with the game you play, chaps. One of you is bound to get burnt."

A chill ran through his body at Simon's prophecy, yet he laughed it off with false bravado, slapping him on the back. "Come now, Carlyle. You're sounding like an old biddy."

Simon's eyes flashed in irritation as he jostled Ransom's hand from his shoulder. "Am I the only one that sees the foolishness in this game?"

Ransom eyed Anterton who chuckled with a nonchalant shrug, his arm hooking over the back of his chair. "Indeed, it looks that way."

Simon cast a quick glance around them before leaning forward. "You fellows cannot disregard a gal's feelings like that," he said with a harsh whisper.

Anterton chortled. "You're a fine one to talk. What about you and what's-her-name."

Carlyle's cheeks darkened, his fists clenched at his side, his stormy gaze slicing into Anterton. "You keep her out of this."

"Listen, it's all in good fun. Much like the other times. Besides, I'm sure she recovered from it." Anterton waved his hand, unconcerned over Simon's thunderous visage.

Sensing that the discussion was fast getting out of hand, Ransom interceded and pulled Simon aside as he advanced on them. "Calm down," he said in a low voice. "We are not about to cause another scene."

Simon shot a furious glance over Leahaven's shoulder. "It seems that it's something Anterton relishes."

Ransom nodded gravely. "Indeed. But it's no reason to come to cuffs with him."

Pulling away from him, Carlyle jerked on his coat and pierced him with a steady gaze. "Don't let him draw you into his game. The ennui is a deadly thing."

Again a shiver passed over him at those words, yet he managed a stiff chuckle. "Ennui happens to us all. It's hardly an incapacitating illness."

"And it's hardly a reason to abandon all your scruples."

Ransom's lips rose in repressed mirth. "Scruples? Dear man, as far as the *ton* are concerned, we have none. Come, let us have a drink."

Leading the way, he took the decanter from the side table and poured two cups of brandy. Handing one to Simon, he sipped his and sighed as the smooth liquid settled around him and chased away the chill. Carlyle's words did have merit and even though he knew the bet no longer motivated him, he found it difficult to let it go.

"Good evening, gentlemen." Ransom turned to find himself once more in the presence of Lord "Toplofty".



"My lord," he greeted, tipping his head a fraction and raising his cup.

"So you're a Quincy, eh?"

Ransom wanted to chuckle. The man was quick to cut to the subject at hand.

"Indeed I am."

"Terrible thing, the way your father put the spoon in the wall."

All humor vanished at the man's words, and Ransom found himself despising this gentleman's company. Something dark and terrifying stirred within the pit of his belly. Lord or no, he deserved a proper set-down. "Quite. I'm surprised one of your standing would even broach such a subject. Indeed, shall we discuss our ladybirds or should we wait until we are in the drawing room? I'm sure your wife would like to hear of your new mistress."

The man's bushy eyebrows raised a fraction then dropped. "How dare you speak to me like that!" he sputtered.

Ransom raked his gaze over him as though what he saw was distasteful to him. "I dare what I please."

Simon jerked on his elbow, but Leahaven paid him no attention as he watched the lord struggle with his fury at the insult.

"Listen here, young whelp. I don't know what your plans are, but your advances on my daughter are unwelcome," the lord finally sputtered.

Ransom chuckled. Already it was assumed that he wished to tup Lady Christine. The woman, though attractive, lacked the appeal that Lady Winifred possessed. No one could hold a candle to her. He drew himself up, his icy gaze cutting into the "concerned" father. "They are certainly not unwelcome by your daughter. She is a hot little piece, ripe for the picking. But it is not me you need worry about, but your precious daughter."

The man's chest puffed out, his face turning a livid red at his words. "I'm warning you to stay away from her."

With a nonchalant air, he raised his glass to his lips and sipped, eying the tubby lord with disdain. "Sounds to me like you're worried she'll succumb to my ... charms. If she wishes to be tugged, then by all means, I'll oblige, but I doubt I would be the first to till that field."

The man's hands rose to his chest and he looked as though he was about to have an apoplexy. *Good.* "Don't you dare speak about my daughter like that," he gasped.

Leahaven stared at him, his lips pursing in a harsh line. "If it bothers you so, you might consider demanding satisfaction. It would give me great pleasure to run you through so I can speak ill of the dead also."

The man spluttered for a reply, his skin losing color at the blatant reference to his death should he demand a duel. Not bothering to wait for a reply, Ransom stepped past lord "Toplofty" and sauntered back to Anterton, who sat regarding him with ill-concealed amusement. For some reason he felt that the joke was on him.

"What do you find so amusing?"

Anterton leaned back in his seat, a self-satisfied smile on his lips. "Do you know to whom you just delivered that rake-down?"

Ransom shrugged. "No. Should I?"

"That is Lord Samford, dear friend."

A chill swept over him, and his eyes slid shut as he groaned in dejection. His short-lived satisfaction faded into frustration. Devil take it. He glanced over his shoulder

at Lord Samford who busied himself with downing the remainder of his drink. The set lines of the man's features revealed his agitation.

He glanced at Simon, whose helpless shrug sent a frizzle of irritation through him. "You could've told me," he growled.

"And ruin a perfectly entertaining scene? I'm thankful he didn't," Anterton said.

Heated rage and futile frustration bit at Ransom as he scowled at the Marquis's amused visage. In fact, now he regretted he'd saved the chucklehead's hide by pulling Carlyle aside. A little fisticuffs would've been far more beneficial to all concerned.

Clenching his cup, he measured his breath in an attempt to gain control of the fury that stirred to life. Biting down hard, he set his lips in a grim line as he stared at Anterton, whose laughing gaze calmed at the undercurrent that burned beneath the surface.

Ransom had the foresight to leave lest he do some real damage as the black terror of his rage bit into his flesh with its putrefied claws. Not bothering to excuse himself, he left the room, his direction having no purpose but to outrun his past.

Cutting across the hall, he fought for control as the echoes of a time long gone rang in his ears and brought with it the pain of death and futility.

## Chapter Seven

Winifred rolled over and stared out the window of her room as the moon shone through the glass and bathed the chamber in its silver light. Outside the window a branch trembled in the wind, and she watched the shadows dance along the walls. Sleep eluded her, and she found that her mind kept on drifting to Lord Leahaven and his absence later in the evening.

His friends hadn't appeared too relaxed with their surroundings, their gaze often drifting out the drawing room door. At first she'd concluded that the gentlemen were uncomfortable with attending to the ladies, but as time wore on she realized that their pre-occupation was due to concern. Concern for Ransom. Why?

Her father's thunderous disposition prompted her to believe that perhaps there had been some sort of confrontation. In fact, all the gentlemen seemed disinclined to participate in any general conversation, and Lady Maypin was quick to call it a night.

Groaning, she pushed back the covers and sat up. It was futile to wait for sleep to visit her, and she didn't relish the idea of watching the shadows dance across her room for the remainder of the night. Shrugging into her robe, she lit a candle and shielded it as she moved across the room to open her door.

Peeking outside, she shivered at the idea of walking through the dark halls, unable to rid herself of her ridiculous childhood fear. Hesitating, she gathered her courage and crept down the narrow hall, her fingers touching the smooth wallpaper as she went. The silence of the house struck her anew, and her pace picked up as she scurried down the stairs, her bare feet muffled against the cool wood.

The wide-open space had an eerie feel as shadows danced across the walls and the winds whistled through the cavernous space. Swallowing hard she found the door to the library, jerked it open, and hurried inside.

Sighing with relief, the enclosed walls offered her solace as she leant up against the door. A shadow shifted within the confines of the room, and her relief melted into dread as the darkness rose from the depths of her nightmare and gathered form. Good Lord!

Letting out a cry of terror, she dropped her candle and fumbled for the doorknob, her fingers shaking and unable to grasp the handle. She clutched the cool knob and twisted, but it failed to budge. Jerking on it with vigor propelled by terror, she gasped as cold fingers touched her shoulder and spun her around.

"Dear God, dear God, dear God," she uttered, her hands covering her face.

"Calm yourself. It's I, Leahaven."

Winifred stilled, her fingers separated, and she peered up at his looming form. Sighing, she dropped her hands, crossing her arms around her chest. "What are you doing here?"

Teeth flashed in the darkness. "What are you?"

"I couldn't sleep."

Fabric shifted as he shrugged. "Neither could I."

He stood so close to her, near enough for her to feel the heat of his body. Gulping as his fingers slid across her shoulder, down her arm and up again, her attention shifted to the trail he blazed across her skin. His touch tingled across her skin as he encased her hand in his, bringing it to his lips and kissing it with reverence, his hot breath heating her knuckles.

Something profound shifted, and she stared up at him as he ran the ball of his thumb over her knuckles. He pulled at her hand and drew her from the door as she followed without question to the settee. With his other hand he shifted a lock of hair from her face, hooking it behind her ear, his gaze glittered with intensity. He trailed a lazy finger along the column of her neck, and she shivered, delight flaring to life at his actions.

Cupping her cheek, his breath hitched as though he was moved by what he saw. His thumb ran along the bottom of her lip, and Winifred gasped, heat pooling in the pit of her belly, the night forgotten as she sat still in his embrace. His thumb stilled over the edge of her mouth, and he leaned forward, taking her in a passionate kiss.

Her mouth opened to him as his tongue invaded without hesitation. His lips slid across hers in ardor, and his hand squeezed her waist, drawing her closer to him. He leaned into her, forcing her back, and his soft groan touched her heart. His hot breath ran along her skin as his warm lips touched her below the jaw line, and her chin tilted up to accommodate him.

"Ah, Win," he moaned, kissing the column of her exposed neck and coming up again.

Kissing her with fervor, his fingers massaged her waist, his body pressed against hers and blocked out the cool night air. His tongue caressed the depths of her mouth, incapacitating her under the haze of desire.

His hand moved to untie the belt around her waist, and she made no move to stop him. His palm glided upward and fondled her breast, evoking a gasp from her. He rolled one nub to peaking awareness, and pleasure tingled across her skin.

Pulling back, he began to work at the buttons of her dress. The cool air touching her collarbone brought self-awareness crashing down upon her and with it the rationality to halt his fingers. Her hand shifted to his shoulder, her common sense demanded precedence as she pushed against him. "Wait."

He drew back, the dark depths of his eyes glittering with intensity. "What?"

"I cannot let you continue."

"God, Win," he said, sounding pained. "Do you know how much you have enchanted me?"

This was new. She pushed harder on his shoulder, and he relented and sat up, a regretful sigh slipping passed his lips. "We have only just met, and yet you have forced your attentions on me as though I were some ladybird."

He glanced at her. "You think I forced myself on you?"

A heated blush ran across her skin. "Well, no. But gently bred ladies should never entertain such advances from a gentleman."

He chuckled, and she bristled at his humor. "My dear flower, do you honestly think that a gentlewoman never kissed her suitor? Then what is the requirement for chaperones? Besides, I would marry you even if you were the most immoral of women."

Her breath hitched at the mention of marriage. "You want to marry me?"

His gaze sliced from her as he raked a rough hand through his hair and rubbed the back of his neck. "I'd wished to approach the situation delicately." He looked at her. "But yes, I do."

"Even if my father disowns me?" she asked in disbelief.

"Even then."

Did he think her father wasn't serious? "My father is very final in his decisions."

He chuckled, a grating sound. "I know."

Trepidation ran cold fingers along her spine. "What do you mean?"

He slipped his fingers between hers and drew them onto his lap. He kissed each one and sighed, her anxiety rising at his hesitation. "Your father doesn't see me in a good light. It's highly unlikely he would approve of my suit."

"And you don't care?"

His gaze cut to her, his dark brows drew together. "No."

Winifred smiled, a wave of pleasure infused her body, and she squeezed his fingers with hers. Sensing her unspoken acceptance he whispered her name as his lips encompassed hers once more. The kiss was filled with reverence. His tongue skimmed across her mouth and retreated.

He pulled back and stared at her, his eyes burning into her skin. She rubbed her cheek against the hand that cupped her cheek and smiled, her joy knowing no bounds. "Never fear, we shall make my father see reason."

Ransom shook his head. "And even if he does not, would you still defy him to be with me?"

"Yes," she replied without hesitation. This felt right. "Besides, once father realizes we are in love--we are well matched, he will relent," she said, ducking her head in chagrin.

He finger hooked under her chin and forced her to look into his eyes. "Ever the optimist." His praise sent a spiral of pleasure through her. "Are we?"

Winifred bit her lower lip, uncertain of what he asked. "Are we what?"

"In love?"

Her heart thumped against her chest at his words, and she glanced away from him with a nonchalant shrug, her body peeked to awareness, sensing a shift in his demeanor. "I thought perhaps...."

"Do you love me?"

She looked at him, and his gaze turned vulnerable, his fingers stilling beneath hers as he waited for her answer. Was she in love with him? She couldn't say definitely that she was, yet she did possess strong feelings for him. "I do feel something for you. Something different, but very strong."

His lips tilted in a lopsided grin. "An encouraging sign. Tell me, dear heart, would you object if I ask to see you again? Alone?"

Alone? The thought titillated and mortified. Would she have the courage to abandon propriety for the sake of love? "Why would you ask me to do such a scandalous thing?"

"Winifred, I find myself at a loss when I am not around you. This feeling I have for you is unreasonable, illogical and new to me. I cannot stop thinking about you."

Could she do it? Dare she? "I know Lady Maypin has organized a game of Pall Mall tomorrow. Perhaps, you will join us?"

"It will be my pleasure." He stood and held a hand out to her. "Perhaps we should both seek our beds. At least one of us may get some sleep tonight."

Accepting his hand, she allowed him to lead her from the library. They crept like misbehaving children up the stairs and down the hallway. Stopping before her bedroom door, she leant up against it, her hands holding the handle behind her.

"Good night," she whispered.

His hands grasped her waist, and her lips rose to meet his as they shared another passionate kiss. Their breaths mingled as their tongues waltzed in a feverous dance. A molten pool of desire washed over her as her knees weakened.

When he pulled back, his breathing came in erratic puffs as he stared down at her. "Good night," he rasped out.

Turning, she twisted the handle and stepped inside, resting against the door as she recovered. Could she say she was in love? Most definitely.

\* \* \* \*

Standing on the estate lawn surrounded by trees, Lady Maypin had organized a picnic for her guests. Many of the parents and chaperones took advantage of the umbrellas available and lounged in their shade. Winifred flicked a lock of hair that abandoned her bonnet and hooked it behind her ear, her eyes drifting to Lord Leahaven who stood among his friends in casual conversation.

As though sensing her stare, he turned. His twilight eyes pierced hers and held a deep meaning within those depths. Her skin tingled under his regard before he turned away.

Cecilia's mouth dropped open, her attention shifting between her and Ransom, a knowing twinkle in her eyes. "You're blushing. Whatever have you been doing, Win?"

Winifred covered her cheeks, an embarrassed smile tugging at her lips. "Nothing."

"Nothing, my foot," Cecilia waved her hand in disbelief. "Certainly not. You must tell me."

Resolute, Winifred dropped her hands and set her features into calm disinterest. "You are seeing things, Cel. Ransom--Lord Leahav--"

"Aha!" Her cousin pointed an excited finger at her. "When did you become so familiar with Lord Leahaven?" Her hand rushed to her lips as she gasped, her eyes twinkling. "Winnie, how exciting."

Grabbing Cecilia's hand, Winifred drew it down with a cautious glance about her. "Shh! I don't want father to know that I have set my cap on Lord Leahaven."

Her cousin's face scrunched in disappointment. "Why not? Once you assure your father of the Earl's fine qualities, he is bound to relent. Lord Leahaven is a wonderful catch." She giggled behind her hand. "You will be the envy of all the ladies of the *ton* for having taken down one of the unattainable Devil's Trio."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"No, no, I'm quite serious. Why I've even heard Lady Lauren whispering about them."

Winifred rolled her eyes at the reference to Lady Lauren, a diamond of the first water with more admirers than one could count. "I hardly see how your reference to Lady Lauren proves anything."

"Of course it does. For her to even notice those gentlemen must surely mean she

is only voicing what every other woman is thinking.”

“What a preposterous assumption,” she said, yet she couldn’t help but glance in Ransom’s direction. Was it true? Did he often rebuff the attentions of young misses?

“No, I’m very certain of this. Why to think that *you* have captured his interest.” She tittered again. “What a thrilling thought!”

“I thought you said he was a scoundrel.”

“I never!”

“Yes, I remember quite clearly you telling me he was trouble and to steer clear of him.”

“Well, that was before I knew he was a true gentleman. It’s obvious those rumors are unfounded.”

Winifred wanted to roll her eyes at her cousin’s inclination to romanticize everything and change her mind whenever the moment suited her. “You won’t tell my father though, will you?”

Cecilia’s hand fluttered to her chest, with a mock gasp of offense. “I would never. More fool me to try and impart such wonderful news to that dragon.”

Stifling a giggle, Winifred smiled. The shared humor warmed her and chased away her fears of her father.

“Come ladies!” Lady Maypin clapped her hands as she approached, an excited smile on her lips. “I have acquired some players. Come, you must choose your mallets.”

Hooking her elbow around Cecilia, they strolled along after Lady Maypin to the group that waited. Winifred’s eyes fell on Lord Leahaven, and he looked up and held her gaze, with a small lopsided grin. Cecilia didn’t miss the interaction as her fingers tightened over Winifred’s arm, a soft squeal slipped past her cousin’s lips.

“Lady Winifred. Lady Cecilia.” He inclined his head, his hand spread out to indicate to the mallets. “After you.”

Staring at the colored mallets, Winifred selected the red one while Cecilia collected the yellow. Stepping back, she waited while the other players selected their mallets. Ransom snatched up the green mallet, and his gaze slipped to hers as he pulled back. She knew the significance of such a selection and her body tingled with anticipation. Should they choose to play the game in pairs, he would be partnered with her.

“Very good!” Lady Maypin announced, clapping her hands. “Single shots, ladies and gentleman. Let the games begin.”

Turning, she watched as footmen ran about to set up the course. The wickets were placed in the ground and everything was ready for them to begin. Lady Christine was the first to strike. After a few practice swings, she sent her blue ball flying several meters into the air, landing safely within the green.

Next it was her turn and she placed her ball between the starting stakes, aimed, and swung with all her might. She hit the ball square and it flew a fair distance, prompting a surprised gasp from some of the contenders. With a smug smile, she turned back and tilted her hip, her red mallet swaying in her hand.

Anterton and Cecilia were quick to take their strokes and soon it was Lord Leahaven’s turn.

“Your shot,” she said with a cheeky grin to Ransom.

His dark eyebrows raised a fraction, and he returned her smile with one of his

own before taking his own shot. Swinging the mallet high, he hit the ball with a thunk. It flew well over hers. It bounced across the green and rolled to a stop against the root of a large tree just beyond the boundary. His growl of frustration prompted a small giggle from her, and he glowered at her.

"It was such a marvelous shot. A pity it's out of bounds," she said, unable to rub salt in the wound to his manly pride.

His lips pursed, whether to stay a biting remark or a smile she wasn't certain, but he inclined his head just a fraction and stood back to allow the next player her shot.

Once everyone hit their balls across the grounds, they moved off to stand by their corresponding balls. When it was her turn, she eyed the wicket with relish. If she was careful with her aim, she could slide her ball through it. Crouching, she tilted her head and judged the distance. Indeed, Pall Mall was a very serious game for her.

With a firm nod at her mental calculations, she stood, held her mallet high ... and made her first mistake. As she began her downward arch, she chanced a look at Ransom, resting against a tree trunk, and as she did so, he winked. She hit the ball off center, and it flew high in the air, but not far enough, sending a frizzle of irritation through her.

"No, no, no," she murmured as the ball was propelled off course and veered to the right and fell through the trees. Out of bounds. "No!" She growled through clenched teeth and stomped after her wayward ball.

Ignoring Leahaven as she strode past him, she slipped past the shrubbery and into the shadows beyond. Letting out an unladylike curse, she lifted her skirt and ducked under a branch, her eyes adjusting to the shadows.

Light splintered from above, and the earthy scent increased the further she traversed into the forest. How hard would it be to find a bright red ball? She stopped her search, her hands on her hips as she squinted in the dimness. *Aha!* There it was. Scooping up her wayward ball, she turned and ran smack into a solid chest.

Letting out a squeak of surprise, she stumbled back. A hand snatched for her arm as her back foot hit an upturned root and twisted under her, pain searing through her ankle as it crumbled. Her cry of agony echoed through the forest as she hit the ground.

Hot burning pain throbbed up her calf and wrapped around the bone. Her breath came in gasps, and her eyes squeezed shut in a grimace. She rolled onto her back, groaning at the effort and panting for control. Tears leaked through her closed lids, the cool drops sliding across her skin and into her hair.

Twigs broke underfoot and she peaked through her lids to find Leahaven crouching beside her, his brows drawn together in a fierce frown. Without a word he scooped her up, the movement sending another stab of agony through her leg as another cry slipped through her pursed lips.

"Terribly sorry, love," he whispered in a strained voice, as he placed a kiss on the top of her head. "It was foolish of me to sneak up behind you."

If she had the strength she would've asked why he had followed her, but all her concentration was caught up in staying the pain that throbbed incessantly up her leg. It wasn't long before they broke out into the open to find Lady Maypin and her guests standing just beyond the forest.

"What happened?" Lady Maypin squealed.

"I believe Lady Winifred has injured her ankle," Ransom said.

In the distance Winifred spotted her father's stormy gaze and curled deeper into



Ransom's chest, hiding her face in his arm. As though sensing her distress, he drew her in closer to his body, close enough for her to hear his heartbeat.

"Oh, does it hurt terribly?" Lady Maypin cooed. A gentle hand touched her shoulder, and Winifred nodded in response, the wool of Leahaven's jacket rubbing against her face. "We must get her seen to. You must take her to her room."

"He most certainly will not!" Winifred stared into her father's thunderous expression, his chin quivering in his fury.

Lady Maypin's jittery fiddling of her hands revealed her confusion as her gaze shot between Lord Leahaven and the Marquis. "But ... but, surely Lord Leahaven is more ... capable of such a task."

If it were possible, Winifred swore his brows drew lower at Lady Maypin's comment. Her father wasn't one to readily admit defeat. He strode to them and held his arms out for her. She knew her father wouldn't have the strength to carry her the distance required.

Leahaven's arms tightened about her, and she breathed a sigh of relief that he wouldn't give her up to Lord Samford. "I am quite capable, my lord." He glanced at Lady Maypin. "Lead the way, if you please."

Her father's face darkened at Ransom's blatant disregard for his preference. His chest puffed in and out with anger but he didn't say anything as Lord Leahaven strode past him. Curling once more in his arms, Winifred breathed in his scent of sandalwood and man, a fragrance uniquely his own.

Concentrating on the sound of his breathing and the beat of his heart, Winifred attempted to move away from the pain that seared around her ankle with every step he took. The creaking of a door opening prompted her to look up, and she found herself in her room. A small shiver of embarrassment went through her.

Never had a man entered her sleeping quarters. Even if it were but temporary, it still mortified her. He laid her upon the bed, the cool sheets crackling under her weight as she settled onto the mattress. Releasing a soft moan, she gripped Ransom's neck, her foot throbbing as she stretched it out.

"Are you all right?" he whispered.

Winifred looked into his worried visage, his brows drawn together with concern, and her heart expanded with love. "Yes. It's only a little sore."

His eyes darkened with emotion as he rubbed her arms before gently removing them to place a kiss on each knuckle. "I shall stay if you need me."

"You shall not! Now, step away," her father blustered as he jostled Leahaven aside.

Ransom's lips set in a tight line as he stood back from her, his eyes flashing with fury, yet he inclined his head and left the room.

Lord Samford turned to her with a face darkened with fury, unmindful of Lady Maypin who still stood in the room beside her mother. "What have you been doing?"

Winifred stared up at him, alarm surging under her confusion. "Wha ... whatever do you mean, father?"

"Do not play coy with me, young lady." He strode over to the bed and glared down at her. "I see the way you look at him."

Her eyes widened, her foot throbbing even more as her heart thumped against her chest.

He smirked at her. "Didn't you think I wouldn't see, that I wouldn't know?" His face settled into immovable stone. "I forbade you to be with him, yet you blatantly disregarded my orders."

"Father he and I--"

"He doesn't love you," he continued over her harshly. "You are nothing to him but a means to an end."

Tears burnt the back of her eyes at his conviction. Did her father truly think she was unworthy of a man's affections? "You're wrong," she whispered, hardly believing that she had the courage to utter those words, yet they came forth as though torn from her.

He drew in a harsh breath, his eyes flashing with fire. The compulsion to look away from him came hard and strong. "What did you say?" He enunciated each word, the warning there for her to back down.

Her lower lip trembled, and she considered not repeating herself, lest she bring his wrath upon her, but a long beaten down stubbornness rose to the surface, and her chin tilted a fraction. "You're wrong," she said. Her voice wavered, yet she stood up against him.

His brows rose in surprise then swiftly fell in censure. "You impudent wench," he bit off, and Winifred recoiled at the sting of his words. "You don't think I'll cut you off? You'll be left with nothing, see if your precious Earl wants you then!"

Her mother stepped forward, her hands clasped before her in agitation, a concerned frown on her brow. "Husband--"

He whirled on her. "You stay out of this." He turned back to Winifred. "I forbid you to see him. Should I see you with him, I shall end your Season and you can spend the rest of the year at our estate."

"But he loves me!" she cried.

His hand rose high in the air ready to strike her, yet she held her ground, her lips settled in a grim line, daring him. Clenching his fingers, he brought his hand down, and she kept a calm façade, not revealing her relief. "He doesn't love you. More fool you for thinking so. I shall never condone your marriage to him. See if he'll have you then, because I won't pay a farthing."

He turned on his heel and strode from the room and paused only before Lady Maypin. "She is not to leave this room, Mary," he warned her.

"But--" her aunt protested.

"No." His hand sliced the air and Lady Maypin cringed.

The door slammed behind her father, and the tears came. Winifred covered her face with her hands, and her ankle throbbed more than it did earlier under her distress. It wasn't true. Ransom would have her without her inheritance, for he loved her. He did.

\* \* \* \*

Winifred bit her lower lip to keep herself from crying out, the pain in her ankle intensifying as she limped down the stairs. During her two days of confinement she had read the last book available to her, embroidered her last handkerchief. Indeed, the letter from Cecelia was a Godsend. Ransom wanted to see her, and she battled the stairs in an attempt to reach him.

Hobbling across the hall, gasping at the pain, she reached for the door of the library. The flickering light beneath the door told her that he waited for her. Grasping

the knob she leant on it as she entered the library.

Ransom paced within the room and turned upon her entry, his agitated frown melting into a smile as he noticed her. Dressed as though he had come straight to the room after supper, his cravat hung loose around his neck, and his hair was in disarray. In an instant he was at her side and drawing her into an embrace.

"My dear, I have been forbidden to see you. What is going on?" She hissed at the pain that knifed through her leg, and he drew back, his concern overshadowing his joy. "I'm such a dolt. Come, I'll take you back to your room." He swept her in his arms, and Winifred held tight, once again relishing the feel of his arms around her.

He mounted the stairs with ease and traversed the hall in silence, his light footsteps belying the weight he carried. "Hold onto me," he whispered, and when she did so, he opened the door to her room.

Her chamber was awash in darkness and he found the bed and eased her down upon it. Searching near the bedside table he found the lantern and struck a match, a flame flaring to life and washing the room in light. She shifted toward him, unable to hold a grimace at bay.

"I should've remembered," he murmured, his hand brushing her cheek and hooking a stray lock behind her ear. "It was rude of me to ask you to see me, but I knew no other way."

Winifred closed her eyes for a moment and relished the feel of his hand on her skin. "It's all right. I needed to see you." His eyes flared with heated emotion at her words. "My father knows."

His hand stilled on her cheek. "Knows?"

She sighed, pain lodged at the back of the throat. "He said some horrible things. He said you wouldn't want me if I didn't have my inheritance."

"That's not true," he said, vehemence lacing his tone.

Endeared by his words she continued. "I do love you. No one has looked at me the way you do, I--"

Her words were cut off as he kissed her passionately. His tongue swept into her mouth as she opened for him, her moan mingled with his as his hands ran across her body. Her arms curled around his neck, drawing him closer to her as she absorbed every part of him. His hands ran a delicious line across her body, and she was unable to hold the soft mewl that rose to her throat.

He pulled back and whispered her name with ardor, his hands making quick work of the buttons on her front and easing the folds apart. His breath hissed as he stared at her exposed chest. "Heaven," he whispered. He ran loving kisses along her collarbone, down her chest and whirled his tongue around her nipple.

Her hands wrapped in his hair as she gasped at the scandalous sensations. He laved her breasts as though they were some type of delicacy, and she relished it as liquid heat pooled between her legs. Whatever he did, she knew she wanted more.

He worshipped her smooth skin, plucking at one nipple with one hand and suckling the other with wild abandon.

"Please, Ransom," she gasped. "Make me yours."

In the dim light she sensed a shift in the air as he pulled back. She looked at Ransom's tense features and rubbed her fingers along his strong jaw line, his attention shifting from something within him to her.

“Is something amiss? It was me, wasn't it. I was too wanton.”

His eyes crinkled. “Oh, no, dear heart. You were beautiful. But I want to do this right. I want you to be my wife before I take you.” He kissed her again. A short chaste kiss. “I shall procure a special license and pick you up a week hence.”

Her heart lurched at his words. He meant to go through with it. Her father was wrong. “Why a week?”

He smiled. “Lady Neely's house party is on then. You claim an illness, and I shall pick you up. Your father won't be there to stop us.”

Winifred nodded. The plan sounded feasible. By the time they returned to London, she would no longer be Lord Samford's bumbling daughter, but Lady Leahaven.

“Very well.” He kissed her again. “I shall see you in a week.”

Once he left, it occurred to Winifred that he had never said “I love you” in return.

## Chapter Eight

Ransom tied his cravat, smiling. Tonight was it. Humming an old love ballad, he turned and picked up the special license that sat on the table, folded it and slipped it into his vest pocket.

"My, you're in high spirits." He whirled around to find Anterton leaning up against the doorframe to his room. "Must say, it's a bit more unnerving than your rages."

Ransom scowled at him. "What are you doing here?"

"I received your message that you wouldn't attend, but knowing Carlyle, I'll never hear the end of it." He looked Leahaven up and down. "Looks to me as though you have plans already. A new demimonde, perhaps?"

"I can hardly afford servants, let alone a mistress."

"Well, what has you dressed to the nines?"

He glanced away from Anterton, whose gaze sharpened on him with apprehension. "I'm marrying Winifred."

Anterton uttered a vile curse and pushed off the frame. "Have you gone queer in the attic? You're actually thinking about marrying that--"

"Don't say another word against her." Ransom stared at him furiously as he shrugged into his jacket. The frayed edges reminded him of his finances and sent a bitter frizzle of frustration through him.

"You think her father isn't going to go through with his threat? If you do, more fool you."

Leahaven sighed. The question that had bothered him over the last week was poised. "No, I believe he will."

"Then what sort of life can you offer the daughter of a marquis?"

He shrugged. "I can offer her my love."

Anterton growled. "You *have* been touched in the head. Do you think your love will last in a crumbling estate with little to keep her warm and well fed through the cold winters? Will your love do that for her?"

Ransom wanted to deny it; he wanted to prove him wrong, but he had little doubt that his friend spoke the truth. If he continued on this path she'd end up unhappy and hating him for his inability to provide for her. She was so delicate and lovely and deserved better than what he had to offer.

\* \* \* \*

Winifred sat in the dark parlor, her heart thumping against her chest every time she heard a carriage approach. Her heart dropped each time it wasn't Lord Leahaven. He was late. Her father might return home any moment. She heard the sound of muffled footsteps coming down the stairs. The light of the lantern moved toward her, and she curled into the shadows in hopes she'd miss their notice.

"Winnie?" queried her mother. Her gaze ran over Winifred's gown, thick mantle and bag at her side. "What are you doing?"

"Mother, I thought you went with Papa."

"I stayed because you were sick." Her face settled in disappointment. "But I see now that I was wrong."

Recoiling under her mother's stern stance Winifred sighed. "I am leaving, mother."

"Leaving? But why?"

"Lord Leahaven and I are going to marry."

Much to her surprise a smile broke over her mother's features. "About time."

"I beg your pardon?"

Lady Samford sat beside her. "I have never seen you so happy as I have seen you in the last few weeks. If you must elope to be truly happy, then I'm not going to stop you."

Moved by her mother's support Winifred ignored the sting behind her eyes and hugged her. "I love you, mama," she whispered through the thickness of her throat. "You know that?"

Her mother sniffled. "Of course I do dear. But you must promise me to make peace with your father when you return."

"I will, mother. We'll be happy, you'll see."

The sound of approaching horses brought her out of the tender moment and she looked outside, the familiar crest standing out in stark contrast against the black carriage. "It's him!" She lurched to her feet, snatched up her bag, and paused. "Thank you, mother." Then she flew to the door.

Running down the steps, she watched the carriage approach, an eager smile across her features. The coach didn't slow down, and she frowned. Surely he could see her? She waved at the driver to catch his attention. The carriage began to slow, and she drew her bag to her body, dancing on her toes for the joy that suffused her.

She glanced back at her home. The curtain drew back, and she waved at the shadowy form there that must be her mother. This was the happiest moment of her life.

Turning her attention back to the carriage, she stepped to the curb and noticed an object being thrown from the vehicle. It hit her on the side of her face with a stinging impact. She dropped her bag with a cry of dismay and wiped at the wet mess, her heart lurching as the stench of rotten tomatoes wafted on the air.

Something wet and hard hit her in the stomach, and she curled in at the pain. Humiliation and disbelief mingled with horror as one projectile was followed by another. Several tomatoes and rotten fruit missed her and landed with a loud splat against the pavement, but the majority managed to find their mark.

She scurried up the stairs and fumbled with the door handle as eggs and tomatoes hit the door. The sound of rumbling laughter sliced through her heart like a rusty blade. Pushing through the door, she slammed it shut and leaned back on it, a sobbing with despair.

"Winnie, what happened?"

She glanced up at her mother and cried all the more, her heart rent in two over her discovery. "I ... it was all a ruse."

"No." The disbelief in her mother's tone ripped at her. "Come, we shall have Mary get you a bath and have cook send up her famous tart. Would you like that?"

Deep down, though Winifred's misery still permeated her body, the burning need for justice rolled forth. "No." She removed her mantle and wiped off her dress and her

face. She wasn't going to let him get away with this.

\* \* \* \*

Ransom swallowed another round of brandy, but it did little to fill the hole in his stomach or warm his heart. He didn't know what convinced him to go along with Anterton's absurd plan, yet for an unexplainable moment he did. It wasn't he that hurled those fruits at her, yet her disbelief and horror cut at him. He wanted to leap out of the carriage and comfort and assure her, yet Anterton had halted him. Was it truly for the best?

A gasp and murmur brought him out of his self-imposed misery and he looked to find the crowd part to admit a very disheveled Lady Winifred. Despite the orange and red stains on her cheek and her bodice, she looked ravishing, her eyes flashing with fire.

"Why?" She stopped before him, abandoning all pretenses.

He glanced at Anterton's warning gaze and Carlyle's curious one. He turned back to her, his heart urging him to make amends yet his head telling him to stay on his path to destruction. "Why what?"

Her eyes widened at his blatant denial. "Why did you forsake me?"

Ransom trained his features into condescending bemusement and frowned. He wished she would abandon her course of action, for he had little choice in his. "Forsake you?"

"We were to elope."

He looked her up and down, hoping she wouldn't see through his façade, yet at the same time wishing she would. He chuckled, a cold grating sound. "Elope? My dear, why would you think that?"

By now they had gained the attention of the entire room. The silence that ensued filled him with despair. Her lower lip trembled as she glanced around them and lowered her voice. "You said you would."

"I never said such a thing," he denied, adopting a haughty stare. "You may be the daughter of a Marquis, but it's in bad form to make things up, my dear." He waved his hand at her, dismissing her coldly.

"But ... you love me!" She cried, tears like the tears within his soul shone in her eyes.

"Wherever did you get a ridiculous notion like that? I may have spent time in your presence dear, but you mean no more to me than an acquaintance."

Her hand raised and pain seared across his cheek as she slapped him. He couldn't help but notice how magnificent she looked in her fury. "I hate you!" She whirled from him and ran from the room.

He watched her leave, torn between following her or allowing her to go. She hated him now and he deserved no better.

## Chapter Nine

*Five years later: London, 1816*

"He's so handsome...."

"I can't believe he is back...."

"...So handsome...."

"...Handsome...."

Winifred groaned. Her eyes rose to the ceiling at yet another mention of the return of the infamous Earl of Leahaven. Yet another praise sung for his re-emergence that set her on edge. Why were the *ton* quick to forget who that man was? A part of The Devil's Trio. The man who once held her heart and destroyed it with callous disregard.

She stood off to the side of the ballroom, snapped open her fan in irritation, and fanned with vigor. If she heard another reference to Leahaven, she swore she would scream.

"Winnie, have you heard? Leahaven has made his triumphant return back into society!"

Gritting her teeth, Winifred turned to observe Cecilia's exuberant expression, her brown eyes lit up behind her askew spectacles. "Yes, I heard," Winifred said through gritted teeth.

Cecilia squinted up at her and adjusted her glasses. Her mouth formed a silent "O" as realization dawned. "Well," she amended, a soft hand touching Winifred's arm, "I am sure he would not dare to seek you out."

Her cousin's attempt to soothe her failed, and it perturbed her to know that she was so transparent. She tried to assume an air of indifference, but the strength of her pent-up anger battered at her composure.

Resisting the urge to scan the area, Winifred kept her attention on her friend. A queasy sensation settled in her stomach and tingled along her skin at the prospect of running into him. "What do you mean? Is he here tonight?"

Cecilia bit her lower lip, a slow, cautious nod confirming her worst fears.

The air was sucked from her lungs as shock drenched her like a bucket of icy water. Self-conscious of her appearance, Winifred ran her sweaty palms along her body and over her hair, assuring that everything was in place. Despite all the hurt and anger she harbored toward him, she still couldn't help the nervousness that bit at the edge of her self-confidence. Agitated and fast losing her composure, she steeled herself in anger. She couldn't have him seeing her like this. Strategy demanded she have the higher ground and that required her to stand tall with dignity and aloofness.

"Not to worry. You look nice," Cecilia assured her.

Her pose of indifference failed under those words. *Nice*? She needed to look smashing, knock the wind out of his bellows beautiful. But she could do little about it now. With another quick perusal of the room, she breathed a sigh of relief. She couldn't see him in the ballroom.

She turned back to Cecilia, wondering if her friend might have misheard. In fact, her dear wish that Lord Leahaven not be in actual attendance tonight brought along a glimmer of hope with it. An ideal moment to gather her wits and prepare for the battle



ahead, should the need arise. "You are certain?"

Cecilia nodded. "Why, yes. You shine everyone else down tonight."

"No. You misunderstood. Are you sure he is here tonight?"

Cecilia frowned; her brows drew together in bemusement. "Yes, I am most certain. I saw him not five minutes ago."

Her short-lived optimism died in the flames of conviction, throwing her back into the insecurities and wariness she thought she had grown out of.

Glancing around the room, she wondered if she could cut her night short without anyone noticing. She had accepted quite a few partners for tonight and her desire to slip away faded fast. The next dance was reserved for someone. She chewed her bottom lip as she ran over the list in her head. Lord Balker. Her heart sank as she stifled a groan. What in heaven's name possessed her to accept a dance from him? In all likelihood, he would be in his cups and half-sprung, and she didn't relish the notion of spending half an hour holding him upright as they twirled on the floor.

With a sigh, she passed a disinterested stare around the room and observed the gilded mirrors on the salmon-painted walls, the deep red velvet curtains that graced the French doors.

As the music wound down, she scanned the room, her foot tapping in irritation. She had yet to spot Lord Balker among the milling guests.

Then the crowd parted again and revealed Lord Leahaven. Her dream and her nightmare. The impulse to hide behind her fan came strong and hard. But she held her ground, half afraid that should she move, he would notice her. She remained still, her body tense as her eyes devoured him. She hated him, yet a small part of her melted. She stifled it with a cruel exactness, her mind running over the events that led her here, hardening her heart against him.

He stood next to a lady talking with enthusiasm, her hands waving in the air as she spoke. He nodded, with a vague tilt to his lips. Winifred shivered as she remembered the feel of his lips on hers, lips that once loved her ... fooled her. A moment later his smile faded and a soft frown formed on his brow. As though he sensed her stare, he turned his head. His clear indigo eyes came into contact with hers, finding her among the crowd.

The Earl of Leahaven looked so handsome, wearing buff breeches and a midnight coat to accentuate his eyes. She fanned herself energetically and scowled at the way her heart made a double beat upon seeing him. The compulsion to lower her eyes bit at her, but she remained focused on him, refusing to bow under his regard.

Her lips thinned and her eyes narrowed at his attention. Still, she stood her ground and stared at him for a long moment, before she sliced her gaze away from his. A wave of satisfaction enveloped her at giving him a cut direct.

He looked the same as he had five years ago. He always had that rogue lock of ebony hair suspended over his forehead, giving him a devil-may-care appearance. His sultry eyes had gazed at her with a mixture of heated interest and astonishment, and she felt warmth suffuse her body at the thought. Some things never changed and it irked her to know that she still found him attractive.

Cecilia let out a gasp of surprise. Winifred's turned to her friend. "What?"

Glancing up at her, Cecilia adjusted her glasses, and Winifred stiffened at the nervous gesture. When her companion tittered, alarm settled upon her. Cecilia never did

that unless under the attention of a gentleman. She looked up from her cousin, and found that Lord Leahaven stood no more than five feet away.

He stared at her with an amused expression, setting her blood aflame with his silent confidence. How dare he even consider coming within *fifty* feet of her! She tilted her chin and snapped her fan shut to signify her displeasure.

He grinned at her show of pique, and she found herself surprised that he had yet to utter some cruel comment over her behavior. Never had he just stared at her so. He always had something to say. She was once the victim of both his smooth charm and brutal wit, and since he was well known for his cutting tongue, she expected something. Anything. But this was both unusual and unnerving.

He held out his gloved hand, as though he wished her to take it. She wanted to snort at the idea. Never would he hold her in his arms again. Did he think her still a fool? She tilted her chin and eyed him with icy disdain.

"Sir, I do believe you are mistaken." Her words came out clipped and to the point. "This dance is reserved for Lord Balker."

A dark eyebrow raised in amusement combined with a tilt of his lips. Oh, she wanted to slap that look off his face. He turned his head to look at something beyond her, and she couldn't help but glance over his shoulder to observe Lord Balker promenade by with another young debutante. Although she herself was no longer considered a fresh-faced girl, she refused to consider the prospect that she now fell into the category of *tabby*. Close to it, but not enough that she warranted such treatment. She scowled at the pair and wished Balker would fall flat on his ruddy face. It wasn't done to leave one's prospective partner on the side of the dance floor to twirl around with another chit.

Smoothing out her displeasure, she assumed an air of casual indifference and held her chin that much higher when the Earl turned back to her. She waited for a cutting remark, a veiled insult that would both hurt and confuse.

It didn't come. Instead a smile formed, a sympathetic rise of his lips. She didn't know which she would've preferred. This or his contemptuous tongue. He made a small circle with his hand, which reminded her that he still held it out. She looked at it, then up at him, and raised her own brow in query. Did he think that she would take it? His standing there proved that he did.

"If you don't mind," she said. "I would much prefer to sit down."

She slipped by him and made a great show of shifting her skirt so as not to touch him. Her stomach clenched at the humiliating wave of despair that he had witnessed Lord Balker's abandonment. Finding the nearest chair, she dropped into it and heaved a heavy sigh as she glanced back at her cousin.

Cecilia approached, escorted by Leahaven, her hand wrapped over his elbow as she giggled and blushed under his attention. A growl of frustration passed her lips. How blunt did she need to be? She drew in a deep breath and stood as he approached.

In fact, the idea of forsaking all decorum to tell him what she thought of him began to have some attraction. Granted, she had said all of this to him before. But then, as a figment of her imagination, the confrontation had left her somewhat unsatisfied. Now he stood before her once more, flesh and blood and very real.

She eyed him with blatant irritation; she folded her arms before her, her foot tapping in annoyance. He released Cecilia and regarded her for a silent, tense moment. His brows drew together, and then he swallowed. "Lady Winifred, I would like to

apologize to you for my--"

She harrumphed at his words. "*Apologize?* You think that a simple apology is going to clear you of your sins? Of what you did to me?" she bit off as pent-up, beaten down fury rose from the ashes and flared to life.

His eyes widened as he stuttered to a stop. He looked quite strained, and she felt a wave of pleasure. He revealed his agitation as he ran a rough hand through his hair. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. "Lady Winifred, I would like to...."

Casting him a furious stare, she stepped forward and stabbed a vicious finger at him, ignoring the audience that began to gather about them. "You would like to, but I hardly care. Is it perhaps because I've come into my inheritance?"

He shook his head at that. "Lady Winifred, I would like to apologize for my abominable behavior. I understand I said some things that were not appropriate--"

"Appropriate?" she repeated, her tone fierce. "You humiliated me before the *ton*. Made a May game out of me by denying the truth. Well, I am hardly a wet-goose now, and I cannot believe you would have the audacity to seek me out."

He stood immobile under her heated tirade, his eyes roaming around the room before his attention settled on her again. "Lady Winifred, I would like to--"

She closed the distance between them and slapped him across the face, the crack of sound echoing in the now silent room. Glaring at him, her breath came in erratic puffs of fury.

"What is the matter with you? Where is your cruel wit? Have you nothing to say?" she hissed with vehemence, the urge to shake her stinging palm strong as she fisted her hand.

He did nothing. He remained where he stood, his features as still as though set in granite, a welt beginning to appear on his cheek. She glared at him, waiting ... waiting for him to use that forked tongue of his.

"Well?"

His eyes widened under her ferocity; his gloved hands clenched in fists at his side. His gaze cut away from her for a moment before it came back to her once more. His brows drew together in concentration. He opened his mouth. "No." It came out in a raspy whisper and Winifred felt a wave of satisfaction.

"I thought not," she said, her tone biting, her chin tilted with pride as she slipped past him and strode from the ball.

So much for a discreet exit.

## Chapter Ten

Ransom returned to the townhouse in a fury. He had seen her, and over the years he had dreamed of what he would say to her. Even practiced it. But it had done him little good, as when faced with the moment he floundered. Slamming the door to his study, he searched out something that he could take in his hand and break, something to still this burning rage and self-hate within him.

The servants had learnt early to remove any breakable items in his study, and he was left to pace the room.

His inability to utter words choked him, his mouth set in a grim line as he released a beastly growl as much as he was capable of. He had been reduced to mere shadow of a man. And he was less than nothing in the eyes of his beloved.

What more did he expect? Did he think the words he longed to utter would fly out in flowery prose like they used to? That she would swoon into his arms and forgive him his sins? The only time that occurred was in his sleep--when he wasn't unconscious from the over-consumption of alcohol or embroiled in a nightmare.

Rage bubbled again at the futility of the situation. His fist clenched and released as he battled for control; his breath came in pants of anxiety in his struggle. He gritted his teeth as he recalled her tears of five years ago, contrasting with the fiery image she portrayed tonight. Those soft pools of turquoise that calmed and spat fire at him. Those eyes that looked at him with disdain and at one time, love.

He sighed and rubbed an agitated hand across his face.

"Lady Winifred," he whispered. "I would like to apologize for my abominable behavior. I understand I said some things that were not appropriate and be rest assured I regret them with every breath I take. I ask if you would find it in your heart to forgive me."

He groaned as he finished the last sentence, his throat aching from the effort. How hard was it to say? When he had his chance to tell her how he felt years ago, he hadn't. Now he might never have the chance, and the thought left him cold inside.

"My lord?" He glanced over at Percival, his man of affairs standing just within the room, his brown eyes wide with concern. "You're home early? Would you care for lemon tea and honey?"

Ransom rubbed his neck. That concoction was the only thing besides alcohol that eased the ache in his throat. Right now he preferred no one's company, only alcohol. "No." He rasped.

"Very well, my lord."

When he turned to leave, he held out a hand to stay him. He motioned Percival over and made his way to his desk. Pulling out a parchment he wrote a quick message and handed it to him.

Percy read the content and nodded. "I'll see she gets it right away."

Nodding with satisfaction, he sat in his chair and watched as Percival left the

room. He ran a hand along the smooth warm wood of the table. The firelight reflected off the lacquered top, a luxury he could now afford.

Indeed, what sort of life could he offer Winifred when he wasn't even whole himself? He thought money would fill that void left in his soul but it hadn't. After the war, he had managed to make some wise investments after selling his commission, and now he lived quite comfortably.

But little good it did him as he spent most his time alone, doing anything that would keep his mind occupied. He had created a vast fortune from his preoccupation, yet he enjoyed not a farthing of it.

He was no longer part of the Devil's Trio. In fact, he hadn't seen Anterton or Carlyle since the war, and he did nothing to find out about their well being. It was better that the past remain where it was. In the past. He didn't think he could stand their looks of sympathy upon realizing that their great adventure had left him less than a man.

He strode over to the side table, removed the lid from the decanter, and drank straight from the bottle. The brandy slid down his throat and warmed his stomach. Wiping his lips with the back of his sleeve, he strode back to his high-backed chair by the fire and stared into the orange and red hues that crackled in the silence.

He glanced up at the mantle clock and sighed. Nine o'clock. His lips tilted in a self-deprecating smile. *Well, bottoms up*, he toasted himself and took a large swallow. He knew what lay beyond him tonight, and he wished that he could drink himself into oblivion before that. Anything to hold off the nightmares, the blood ... the rage.

\* \* \* \*

Cinnamon drifted on the air and titillated his senses. The music of the minuet hummed in his ears as images of a time long ago shimmered before his eyes. He held her in his embrace once more. Her soft, pliant body warmed him and set an ache in his chest. He twirled Winifred in his arms; her lilting laughter delighted him and urged him to steer her into the shadows beyond.

Whispering loving phrases and delightful promises, he eased her into the shadows of an alcove. The darkness in the small space lengthened as a sense of foreboding ripped at his chest, and a queasy sense of apprehension roiled within him. Winifred twisted from his grasp and escaped into the shadows, and he followed after her, calling out her name as she laughed happily in the silence.

Her laughter grew louder in the distance and melded into a sinister sound that didn't sound like her at all. The laughter grew menacing, and from the darkness hands clasped onto his throat, cutting off his air. Gasping, he choked and grasped at the hands, only to find his fingers slip through them. He gagged at the lack of oxygen and struggled with all his might.

In the distance he could hear Winifred calling for him, and despite his struggle he knew she was in danger. "Ransom!"

He jerked awake and gasped. Air hit his lungs with relief, and he slouched back in his chair. His vision swam into focus, and he found himself in his study, staring into Lady Neely's concerned visage, her hand poised as though to shake him awake.

"Another nightmare?" she asked.

Ransom swallowed hard and glanced around him. A blade of sunlight filtered through the thick green curtains of the study, the light reflecting against the brown rug and illuminating the otherwise dim room. Groaning, he shut his eyes and tilted back in

his seat in an attempt to regain his composure. His head felt unusually large. The slight roil in his stomach did nothing for him as sweat slid down the side of his face.

"Was it bad?"

He wanted to chuckle at her words. They were always bad, just some worse than others. He opened his eyes once more and found with a level of irritation that she still stood over him. His self-loathing increased under her gaze of pity. He indicated for her to sit, which she did without objection.

Indeed, Lady Neely possessed a stubborn streak in her that often left him in a fit of fury. Had it been up to him, he would never have returned to Society, let alone London. He waited with barely contained patience as she adjusted her skirt, then dropped her hands on her lap.

When she did deign to look at him, a brow rose in wry amusement. "You caused quite a stir last night."

He pursed his lips, not at all appreciating her humor. That had cost him greatly the night before. He wanted to ask her if she'd planned it, his fingers clenched into the fabric of the chair in his effort to bring the words forth. "How?"

She didn't pretend to misunderstand. "How come?" She laughed, the sultry, melodic sound that was her calling card. "Leahaven, you have been nothing but a grouch since your return, wanting to live like a hermit. But it's not you."

He rolled his eyes at her assessment of him. All she truly knew about him was his reputation. His heart thumped in his chest. It was rumored that Lady Winifred had befriended Lady Neely not long after his abandonment, defying her father and society to do so. His eyes narrowed in on her, his gaze cutting into her with accusation.

She waved her hand at him as though it was of no consequence. "Of course, I knew she'd attend. Thus far you have avoided all soirees, and I thought it about time you two met again. Lah, who would've thought she would be so ... objectionable?"

Ransom clenched his jaw. Any fool would know that she wouldn't appreciate his presence.

Lady Neely tapped her chin, her liquid brown eyes glimmering with speculation. "You know, I do believe she will be riding through Hyde Park this afternoon. She usually rides in the wee hours of the morning but she had plans with her cousin this morning."

He rolled his eyes at her blatant assumption that it would interest him to know Winifred's activities. Yet no matter how he tried to deny it to himself, he knew it was true. He had thirsted for the sight of her for years and searched the gossip columns for news about her, one part eager and the other dreading that he would find her banns read.

"Come now, don't look so sour," she admonished. "I thought you would enjoy the night out. After all, despite your ... display, the party was a success."

With a growl of frustration, he stood. To hell with Lady Neely. He had already filled his promise to her and attended this damned event of hers. It didn't mean that he was required to sit and listen to her reprimand his behavior.

He glared at her, his body tense with repressed fury. Clenching his hands in his effort, he forced his mouth to form the word he needed. His tongue struggled with it as he concentrated to create sound. "Leave."

She laughed and leaned back in her seat as though unmoved by his thunderous expression. "Come now, don't you want to know why I came?"

*To torture me?* He turned and strode over to the mantle and rested his shoulder against it before he gave her a look of condescending curiosity and gestured for her to continue.

"You want to see her, don't you?"

He tried to appear indifferent to the thought of Winifred, but he knew his body gave him away as Lady Neely nodded with satisfaction.

"As you may know, I am quite good friends with our dear bird. I could somehow convince her to see you, or if not, find a way to get you two alone together."

And what could he do then? He couldn't put words together, let alone spout out endearments and accolades. "And do what?" Each word came out with excruciating slowness.

"Why, speak to her in *your* language."

He stared at her, uncomprehending.

"Come now, you must be familiar with the language of love? You do it so well. Body language."

His brows drew together at her implication, and the cold fingers of suspicion burned him. Why did she show so much interest in his life? What did she want from him in return?

"I'm not...."

She waved her hand at him and stood. "Come now. You protest far too much."

His lips twisted at the irony of her words. Protest?

"Well, I must be off." She sashayed out of the room and then stopped at the threshold, her white-gloved hand resting on the doorframe as she looked back at him. "I trust I shall see you at the theatre tomorrow night?"

He shook his head. He'd be damned if he'd pander to her requests again.

She grinned. "Well and good, I shall see you there." She left in a flurry of satin and mischief.

\* \* \* \*

Winifred sighed and adjusted her bonnet as the infernal ostrich feather bounced before her face and tickled her cheek. Steering her mount, she pulled back on the pace of her horse to a sedate walk as she found herself trapped behind a curricule.

Had it not been for her cousin's need for her assistance in selecting a new gown, she would have already had her daily ride and not battled others for the taste of freedom. It was the only true pleasure she received during the day, and she made a point never to miss a ride. Leaning forward, she rubbed her mare's neck and whispered encouragement as her mind drifted to a subject she had battled with all night.

Leahaven.

Her heart surged as the bittersweet pleasure mingled with resentment in a fight for dominance, and she felt a wave of frustration roll through her. Despite years of absence, she still found herself trying to line up the man she knew before the humiliating encounter and with the man everyone else knew.

Then, when she thought she had risen above her petty hate and deep hurt, he had re-emerged into Society and stirred emotions she'd long kept hidden from everyone--most of all herself. All her attempts to appear unmoved had failed, and she had embarrassed herself before the *ton* once more. Her lips tilted in grim satisfaction. Oh, but it did feel wonderful to tell him with a good measure of composure what she thought

of him.

Steering her mount out from behind the curricule, she squeezed through and cantered along Rotten Row, relishing the warm breeze that touched her cheeks and caught a wisp of hair as it caressed her cheek. Smiling, she breathed in a deep sense of contentment, her gaze running across the grassy knoll and large oaks that lined the path.

A glimmer of movement drew her attention within the grounds, and she focused her attention on a black mount that weaved through the trees. Strange how the rider chose to ride through the foliage and around those basking on the grass rather than traverse the allocated path.

Casting the rider to the back of her mind, she urged her mount into a brisk canter, her thoughts drifting to the previous events. She couldn't risk another encounter with Ransom. Her pride and her heart demanded it.

At that moment she heard a brief whistling sound, and her mount grunted and surged beneath her. Gasping, she gripped onto her leads and tried to maintain her seat as the horse veered through the traffic and galloped headlong into the trees.

"Help!" she cried, pulling at the bit in desperation, her heart in her throat as she attempted in vain to pull her mount under control.

Her horse lengthened out beneath her in its effort to outrun an imaginary threat. It panted, fast losing the simple strength of the run and galloping purely on adrenaline.

She bounced precariously on her seat, unable to regain control. The sound of the horses hooves jerked at her heart as her foot caught in the stirrup. Terror lodged in her throat as a cold sense filled her chest. She was about to fall off and be trampled by her own horse.

Beside her a rider appeared, the black head of his mount stretching to come abreast of her crazed horse. Gulping at her panic, she clutched at the reins and attempted to veer her thoroughbred away, but a hand reached out snatched at the leads, and managed with supreme skill to not only bring her horse to a canter but also maintain his own seat.

Swallowing hard at the panic that solidified in her throat, she gasped for a breath. It was the third time she had a mount act strangely, and she was beginning to see a pattern.

"Thank you, kind sir--you!" She glared at her savior, wishing to call back her words as her fury simmered to the surface. "How dare you!"

Leahaven's eyebrows rose a fraction at her anger, and she clutched her riding crop to her, her fingers tightening around the handle at his casualness. "What are you doing here?" she asked harshly.

He frowned, his twilight eyes flaring with dark emotion. "Riding," he whispered.

She glowered at him. What an absurd response. "Don't give me that faradiddle. It's quite obvious to me that you are here for some reason other than to enjoy the sun."

A single brow rose. "Am I?" he rasped.

Winifred clenched her teeth in an attempt to still the sharp anger that flared within her. "I do not care for your condescension, sir."

Her horse shifted beneath her as though sensing her anger, and she gripped the reins lest her horse bolt once more. He remained silent, his quietude setting her off balance as she stared at him through narrowed eyes.

"I apologize," he enunciated, then swallowed hard, his chin slanted as though he



were strained somehow.

"You seem to be uttering that phrase a lot, as though I would care for it." She sniffed.

He smiled, and she released a growl of frustration before she shot him a look of disdain, her chin tilting as she looked at him down her nose. "You have been hiding in your estate over a year, and now in less than twenty-four hours I see you." She snorted. "I hardly think it's merely coincidence."

He remained silent, and she stared at him in furious bemusement. His gaze burned into her, as though he wished to strip away her tough exterior and touch that long hidden vulnerability within, the vulnerability that had cost her her pride. She stiffened in her seat, her shoulders drawn back as she glared at him. "Stay away from me."

Urging her mount forward, she held her back ramrod straight as she trotted away, refusing to look back. Yet, some small part of her wanted to, needed to, and she eased her focus back in an attempt to appear discreet and frowned at the image that met her.

No longer the confidant rogue, his shoulders drooped as he gazed forlornly at the ground. She gritted her teeth. She would never let herself be fooled by him again. Never!

The ride back home was filled with images of the past and the comparison of the Earl of Leahaven she knew as the scoundrel in the past and the oddly quiet one she just encountered in the park. Where was that smooth tongue of his that had titillated her as a young woman? She chewed her lip, paying no attention to her surroundings. Her horse ventured home without so much as a tug from her.

Though she had long outgrown her childish fancy for love, she still found herself craving the feeling, and despised that part of her. Once home, as though in a daze, she mounted the stairs to her townhouse, opened the door, and handed her bonnet to the parlor maid. Her eyes narrowed at the strong odor that permeated the room. The overpowering perfume of flowers drifted on the air and her eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Mary? What is that?"

Her maid smiled, a small blush tingeing her cheeks. "Flowers, milady."

"I know it is flowers. But from whom?"

"I surely don't know, milady." But the conspiratorial gleam in her eye betrayed her.

With an unlady like snort, she stomped into the drawing room and drew to an abrupt halt to stare flabbergasted at the gigantic bouquet that stood in the middle of the room.

The garland of white forget-me-nots and baby's breath blended delicately with red tulips and roses, mixed with an artistic spray of mauve heliotrope and lilacs. All were collected together in careful symmetry, her eyes drawn to the cluster of blue violets that rose above the rest of the nosegay in the center of the bouquet.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

Winifred ripped her gaze from the breathtaking cluster and stared at Lady Neely's amused expression. "How long have you been here?"

Neely shrugged with a delicate laugh. "Not long. Never you mind that. How was your ride?"

Winifred scowled. "Terrible."

"Sounds intriguing, my dear."

She eyed her with suspicion. "What do you know, Elizabeth?"

Lady Neely's eyes widened in melodramatic shock. "Why nothing? What happened?"

Waving her hand, she moved forward and extracted the card that lay within the bouquet. Within the fine cream parchment read a simple line.

*Her fire moves me in times when darkness prevails. L*

She curled her fingers and crumpled the delicate paper in her fist, her lips thinned in a grim line. She stared at the garland with cold speculation, staying the indignation that burned within her.

Indeed, she could see the theme of the flowers represented the same thing. Love. Abiding, ever-faithful love. She snorted at the idea that he, a man that had acted so callously, would even know the meaning of it.

"Who is it from, ducky?"

Winifred's fist clenched around the parchment, the soft ball of paper sinking into her skin as an ugly reminder. "No one of importance."

"Oh, it's from Lord Leahaven."

She didn't welcome the appreciative tone in Elizabeth's voice and turned to her friend. "You like that--that addle pate?"

Lady Neely tilted her head to the side as though amused by her irritation, a glimmer entering her eye as she smiled. "I like him well enough."

"You're as bad as Lady Witherspoon," she mumbled.

"My dear, you don't know the half of it."

Turning back to the bouquet, Winifred couldn't help but appreciate its beauty as she touched a delicate blossom and felt the blooming of something within her that hadn't stirred in years. Snatching her finger back as though burnt, she turned to the parlor maid. "Remove this from my sight."

Scurrying to do as she was bid, the servant scooped up the large vase and carried it from the room, taking the delicate scent with it.

"Such a shame. It would've made a beautiful piece."

Winifred shrugged, unconcerned. "The flowers will wither and die soon enough."

"Yes, but would it not be better served somewhere where people can see it?"

She stared at Lady Neely, her gaze hard. "Is there something you wished to discuss?"

"No, no. I was merely stopping by to invite you to the theatre. I do believe Mr. Kemble is playing tonight."

"Sounds delightful."

\* \* \* \*

Ransom adjusted his cravat, his gaze running over the crowd below, and wondered what possessed him to come. It was not so much that he had been bamboozled into attending, but he found himself reluctant to miss the famous Mr. Kemble.

Resting his hands on the balustrade, he thought about the incident with Winifred. What had caused her mount to bolt like that? The mare gave no indication that it was jittery or threatened in anyway. Indeed, had he not been there, worse things could've happened to her, and he shivered at the thought. It was not unheard of for a person to break her neck when falling awkwardly off a horse.

The noise in the amphitheatre thickened as more guests took their seats. Staring

across from him, he noticed that all the other boxes were filled with occupants, and he remained alone in his. Where was Lady Neely?

As though on cue, the curtain to the box shifted, and Lady Neely stepped through—followed by Lady Winifred. He drew in a sharp breath at the sight of her. Her smooth plum gown accentuated her figure and her luscious strawberry blond locks were held up in an elegant coiffure accentuating her long neck. Licking his lips, he pushed off the banister and controlled the disappointment at her icy glare.

“Good evening,” he greeted calmly. He reached out to accept Lady Neely’s extended hand.

Brushing an airy kiss over her gloved hand, he straightened and gazed at Winifred, knowing by her stiff posture that she wouldn’t readily accept a greeting from him. He inclined his head a fraction and waved his hand for her to take a seat.

With a disdainful sniff, she stepped past him and chose the seat in the furthest corner of the box, her motions abrupt. He released a slow breath, then turned to Lady Neely, his eyes narrowed in accusation. There was no doubt in his mind that she’d planned this.

Unperturbed by his stiff set lips and furious frown, she winked and stepped past him to sit beside Winifred. Clenching his hand into fists, he weighed his options and decided to stay for the show. He turned and stared at the burgundy curtains that covered the stage in an attempt to regain composure and settle his frayed nerves.

Relieving the tightness around his neck, he cleared his throat and worked his jaw, moved his tongue within his mouth to alleviate the tension and prepare him for conversation.

Indeed, he was thankful for Percival’s persistence in making him practice commonly spoken phrases. Often he was able to conceal his ... disability. Of course, that was until Winifred. He found her presence thoroughly unnerving and found it difficult to even utter a simple *no*.

With some measured breaths and practiced hums he turned to find Winifred regarding him with a bemused frown, her eyes flickering with an emotion he couldn’t decipher before they flared with fire, her gaze hardened and she looked away from him.

With a tilt of his lips that belied the vast hole that opened in his chest, he moved over and sat beside Lady Neely, who tapped his leg as though to encourage him. He glanced up at her pleased visage that held a wealth of seriousness in the depths of her eyes. His lips stiffened and he passed a meaningful glance in Winifred’s direction.

Lady Neely blinked slowly with a languorous smile that held something he was very familiar with. Sympathy. Damn it! He moved to stand, but her nails dug into his forearm, the sting setting off his fury. He jerked his arm from her, his heart rate picking up as hot rage bubbled beneath him.

“Leave me be!” The words released from his mouth without thought or difficulty, and Lady Neely jumped in her seat, her eyes widening as her hand shot to her mouth.

Biting down on the fury that seethed and surged without any direction or encouragement, he stiffened in his seat. “I apologize.”

Lady Neely dropped her hands and curled them in her lap, clearly shaken by his outburst. “It’s quite all right.”

The curtains opened, cutting off whatever he might have wanted to say, and the act began. Rather than watch the performance, Ransom wondered about his last outburst,

and the ease with which the words had erupted. For well over a year he had battled with his inability to speak, and in one moment he spoke out his needs.

Hope flared within him. Was he recovering? He glanced at Winifred, whose gaze remained focused on the stage. Swallowing hard, he felt the need to test his voice out once more, but he couldn't very well interrupt them.

Settling deeper in his seat he stared unseeing at the act on stage, his mind running over selective phrases that he had long wished to utter, the most important being "I love you." Intense pleasure and satisfaction surged through him at the thought that he could finally speak what was in his heart, that he would once again feel whole.

He licked his lips and selected a carefully constructed phrase that wasn't ridiculous flowery prose but was honest and solid.

The applause gave him an opening and he smiled, eager to speak to Winifred. He stood and faced the two women. Yet when he opened his mouth, his throat closed up as though something lodged in there.

Hesitating, he cleared his throat and began again, the effort to call words forth sending his short-lived hope into the fire. Tears of frustration burned at the back of his eyes from the effort. Their curious gazes cut into him. He jerked on the lapels of his jacket, and without so much as a look back, he left the box.

He strode along the vast hall, where groups of people converged to seek out familiar faces, while he struggled to find seclusion.

## Chapter Eleven

Winifred stared after Ransom as he left, frowning. He was acting so peculiar, and it gave her an uneasy feeling. How could she battle with a man that seemed so ... peculiar? She turned her attention to Elizabeth, who also seemed bemused by Leahaven's behavior, her brows drawn low in thought.

"Did you plan this?"

Her friend twisted in her seat to look at her, one shoulder lifted in a casual shrug. "Perhaps. But he is ever so unreliable. I could hardly expect him to attend when I ask."

"Like last night?"

"My dear, *everyone* was there."

Winifred pointed an accusatory finger at her. "You knew he was going to be there, and you didn't warn me. Why?"

Elizabeth gasped at her harsh tone. "I didn't think it would affect you so."

"Affect me? You knew what happened. How could you expect his presence not to affect me?"

Lady Neely's mouth dropped open, her eyes widened in shock. "But it was five years ago."

"Yes, five years. Five years of the humiliating reminder that I wasn't good enough for anyone beyond my inheritance. I don't want you playing matchmaker on me. Ever!" She stood and stormed from the box.

Marching with purposeful strides, she weaved and jostled through the crowd, anger burning within her as she searched for the exit. She was not about to sit through another moment with Elizabeth or Ransom. Easing through the front doors, she glanced down the dark streets and shivered with apprehension, hugging her arms around her with hopes that a hackney would pass by.

Fury rose within her. Her gaze flitted back to the entrance of the theatre and she considered returning, but immediately squelched the idea. She couldn't tolerate staying in this state.

She had gone no more than twenty meters from the theatre when a lone figure emerged from the shadows and approached her. His thick mantle and top hat covered his features and he looked quite unassuming, yet a part of her flared in awareness mingled with trepidation.

As though sensing her caution, his pace increased, and Winifred gasped, twisting on her heel she ran for the safety of the theatre. Her steps encumbered by the gown, she ran with all her might, her breath coming in short pants from the restrictions of her corset.

The light of the theatre drew close. She was about to outrun him! The heavy impact of his body knocked the wind from her as she hit the ground. Her chin smacked into the cobblestone, white light flashed before her eyes, and burning pain flared along her jaw. Strong fingers hooked onto her elbows and pulled her up, her struggles availing nothing as she kicked back into vacant air.

She drew a deep breath to scream, but his hand muffled her mouth. Tears of

terror seeped from her eyes and expanded in her chest as she struggled. A sharp sting pulled at her scalp as he twisted her hair and exposed her throat. "Keep quiet," he hissed.

Winifred's sob was muffled by his gloved hand as he dragged her back, away from her sanctuary. Fear surged within her and adrenaline solidified in her bones as she struggled anew. Her fingers raked at his arms and managed to pull his fingers from her long enough to release a short, high-pitched scream.

Agony pounded her in the side of the head, the world tilted sickeningly, her knees weakened, and she crumbled to the ground. Determined to remain conscious while her vision swam before her, she slid her arms forward and watched another figure run forward and launch himself at her attacker.

The assailant tumbled back from the assault of the newcomer, her avenger's fists lashing out with savage justice. Grunts and the sounds of flesh hitting flesh filled the night air as the battle ensued. But unluckily her attacker managed to somehow break free from the scuffle and sprint down the street and into the shadows.

Her savior pushed to his feet and started after him but slowed to a stop and returned to her. Blinking at her blurred vision, she swallowed at the bile that rose to her throat.

Strong legs, so achingly familiar, knelt before her, and she looked up at Ransom's concerned visage, a severe frown on his brow as he eased a finger along her cheek and hooked a lock of hair behind her ear.

Had she the strength, she would have handed him some biting retort, but she had neither the ability or the compulsion to do so. Her eyes slid shut as a blackness consumed her.

Ransom caught the back of her head before she hit the pavement as she lost consciousness. Panic put a bitter taste in his mouth as he looked over her pale features. Glancing over his shoulder to assure himself that her attacker wouldn't return, he eased his hands under her and stood. Her head lolled to the side, the limp form of her body sending anxiety roiling in him.

He drew her close to his body, searched out his carriage, and hurried to it, the urgency to get her to safety his main concern. The footman leapt down and opened the door without question, and Ransom stepped inside. As the coach lurched into motion, he watched them pass the theatre. Perhaps he should've taken her inside, yet a part of him argued for her safety.

He glanced down at her still features and frowned. She was still. Too still. Biting on the tip of his gloves he removed it from one hand and touched his fingers to her soft parted lips, her breath warming his skin. Slow and even.

With a sigh of relief he removed his fingers and drew her body closer to his, reliving the terror he had felt upon seeing her struggle. The man was finely dressed and in his effort to restrain him, he didn't manage to get a good look at his features. He growled at his inability to remember anything significant about the attacker.

The carriage slowed to a stop, and he found himself before his townhouse. Alighting from the cabin, he mounted the stairs, and went straight to his study. Thankful for the blazing fire, he placed his charge gently on the only available settee, her head lolled back. His concern increased upon noticing the large bump that swelled on the side of her head.

"Sir?" He turned to stare at Percy who stood just beyond the threshold, his

questioning gaze flicking to the woman then back to him.

Without a word, he strode over to his table, penned a quick note, and handed it to him. He watched as Percival read over the contents.

"Very good, sir."

Ransom drew in a deep breath. "Get Daph."

Percy nodded and left to do as he was bid. Crossing over to the settee, he knelt beside her prone form and observed her pallid features. She looked ... sad. The thought pierced his heart and guilt burned into him. With a soft hand he ease a strawberry lock over her face and flicked it back onto the settee, his eyes trailing over her, drinking in her image as the auburn hue of the firelight flickered over her skin. The soft sound of cracking embers melded with her even breathing, and he found himself unable to pull away.

His eased his fingers along her hand and encompassed them with his, the ball of his thumb ran over her soft skin. Her lack of movement bothered him. Not a jerk of her fingers or a flicker of eyelashes signaled a return to consciousness.

His spare hand eased up into his own hair and trailed along a scar that marred the side of his head, concealed by his locks. His stomach lurched at old terrors that stirred from the shadows of his mind.

The door creaked open, and he looked up at the elderly woman who entered the room, her nightcap askew as she stopped mid-yawn at the sight that greeted her. "My goodness," she cried and rushed across the room.

Ransom stood, as Daphne looked her over. "Have you sent for a physician?"

He nodded and stepped back, awash with unease as Daphne assisted Winifred to the best of her ability. Settling into his armchair, he watched the progress with a sense of disquiet that woke like a beast within him. He pressed his fingers together and tipped his head forward, his brow resting on the tip of his fingers as he waited and focused his attention on holding his irrational fears at bay.

The physician arrived twenty minutes later, a portly man with spectacles and a bushy mustache. He tottered into the room, where his gaze fell on the prone figure on his settee. "Pon rep! What happened here?"

Ransom stood and approached the doctor. His throat ached as he pushed the word past his lips. "Attacked."

The elderly man's eyes widened. He placed his leather case on the ground to look over his patient, his fingers brushing over the exposed skin of her arms and neck.

He tipped back on his heels, and looked back at Ransom. "A cold compress to the wound to ease the swelling. She may feel a bit sick when she wakes, so I'll give you some laudanum to help ease her pain."

Accepting the bottle, he placed it on the nearby table. His gaze shifted to Winifred, focusing on the large lump that purpled the side of her face. His brows drew together in repressed rage, and he wished again for a chance to find her attacker.

Why would a gentleman assault a gently bred woman outside a public establishment? It didn't seem feasible that the man mistook her for some doxy, nor did it seem possible that the man was even a peer. He shivered at what could've happened if he hadn't stepped outside to head home.

His stomach churned at the anxiety of seeing her struggle, and yet he had been to late to save her from injury.

“What happened?”

Rocked from his ruminations, he glanced up to find Lady Neely standing within the doorway, her hands clutching at the frame as though she would collapse. His lips stiffened at the thought that she would consider him responsible for the attack.

“I...” His throat closed up on him, and he felt as though he was choking. God, he hated this. Raking a hand through his hair, he cleared his throat and moved away from the settee to sit in the armchair.

Fabric shifted as Lady Neely glided further into the room, a shimmer of auburn material in the firelight. “What happened?” she asked softly.

He released a sardonic chuckle and glanced at her concerned visage, her hand above him along the top of his high-backed chair. “I ... didn’t do it,” he said, his throat throbbed with the effort as each word came forth.

Lady Neely sighed in frustration. “I know that. What happened?”

He stood, intent on writing down what he had seen, but she stayed him with a hand on his shoulder, her eyes imploring. “*Tell me.*”

Drawing in a harsh breath, his heart thumped against his ribcage as his chest tightened. He’d be damned if he wanted to struggle through his words to explain. “No.”

Percival stepped forward. “I believe Lord Leahaven saved Lady Winifred from being kidnapped.”

“Did you see this?” she asked

His eyes widened. “Well, uh, no. But I did pass the message on to you.”

“That’s not good enough!”

Ransom’s eyes narrowed on Lady Neely, the tension in her body revealing something deeper. He nodded to Percival and Daphne. “Leave.”

Both servants left without question and shut the door as he stepped toward Lady Neely. “What do you know?”

She glanced up at him, then her eyes flickered away. “Nothing.”

Fury gripped him as his hand latched onto her elbow and bit into her skin, her gasp of pain ignored as he drew her forward. Her eyes widened with fear under his anger. “Liar.”

She jerked her arm from him and stepped back, a shaky hand touching her coiffure. “I don’t know anything. All I know is that this isn’t the first time she’s been attacked.”

So his suspicions were correct. “How long?”

“About a month.”

“Who is it?”

“We don’t know. Her horse was shot out beneath her one morning, and she has had some rather close calls when crossing the street, but we all thought that might be coincidence. I didn’t think she would actually be attacked. Who would want to do a thing like that?”

Winifred groaned. His attention snapped to her and he knelt before her, slipping her hand in his. Lady Neely jostled him aside, a furious frown on her brow.

“Let me attend to her. Heaven knows what she would do should she see you first.”

Ceding to her logic, he sighed and stepped back. Anxiety thickened in his stomach and raced along his skin like chilling fingers as he waited in tense anticipation



for her to open her eyes.

Lady Neely tapped her hand, and crooned in a soft voice. Winifred's brow knitted, and her eyelids fluttered open.

"There you are," Lady Neely whispered.

Her frown drew deeper as she looked about her surroundings. Her eyes fell on him and they instantly flared to life. Lurching into a seated position, she groaned. A hand raised to her head as she dropped back on the settee. Her pallid features became strained under her exertion.

Swallowing hard she cracked her eyes open. "Where am I?"

"At Lord Leahaven's townhouse," Lady Neely said.

"What ... what happened?" Her eyes slid shut as though the strain was too much for her.

"Don't you remember what happened?"

Winifred shook her head and hissed in pain. "I do."

Ransom stepped forth, eager to hear her account, but when she remained silent, he cleared his throat to ask slowly, "Who is he?"

Winifred frowned. "Why are you talking to me like that? I've not turned into a widgeon because I have a head injury."

Recoiling at her words, Leahaven's lips stiffened in an attempt to stay the dismay and anger that burnt within him. He couldn't have her thinking he was daft. He twisted on his heel and strode back to the safety of his armchair, opting to remain silent lest he reveal his lie.

"It's quite all right. He doesn't think that," Lady Neely assured. "You just rest, you've had a very trying night. Would you accept some laudanum to help ease the pain?"

Winifred swallowed a mouthful of the liquid and sighed as she leaned back into the settee and was soon asleep.

Lady Neely approached him, her eyes soft with concern. "She's very resilient, you know."

His lips tilted in a sardonic smile. He knew first hand that no one could hold her down. "Yes."

She sat in the seat across from him, a frown deepened on her brow as she gazed into the fire. "Do you think this is going to get worse?"

Ransom nodded. There was no doubt in his mind that his intervention would only aggravate whoever was after her. Efforts would be renewed to reach their goal. He glanced over at her sleeping form. His throat ached from the effort of speech, yet he felt compelled to ask more. Who would want to harm Winifred?

\* \* \* \*

Pain seared along the side of her head and she groaned. Her stomach roiled from the effort, and she cracked an eye open and observed the dim light that speared across her bedspread. Gagging at the churning in her stomach, she rolled over and measured her breaths to regain control.

As the spinning eased, she stared up at the ceiling with unseeing eyes. The events of the previous night ran through her mind with startling clarity. She relived her terror, recalling her struggle, when a startling image came to mind and she gasped. The eyes. Whoever this man was, she knew him once. His eyes were achingly familiar, yet she

couldn't recall to whom they belonged.

Had Ransom not been there ... She shivered at the thought, and her attention shifted inward as she recalled the battle with amazing clarity. Why had he brought her back to his home? Her reputation would have been in ruins if anyone had found out, and Lady Neely wasn't really considered an appropriate chaperone.

She frowned. The action sent pain stabbing through her temple, and she moaned. Twice in one day he had managed to intercede when she was danger, and she found herself battling with her heart and her head.

Her mouth settled in a thin line. She wasn't the same foolish girl that fell for his lies last time. She was a grown woman, and yet despite that she felt her heart softening.

The door opened and Winifred turned her head to see Cecilia poke her head through the door, then step inside, easing the door shut behind her.

"Your mother said you were sick," she whispered as she crept to the bed.

Winifred eased herself up onto her elbow and swallowed hard at the nauseating roll of her stomach. "No, no. I'm quite all right."

Cecilia sat on the bed beside her, her eyes drawn to the side of her face.

"Goodness! What happened to you?"

"Nothing." Her hand touched the side of her head where the pain surged and ebbed.

"It looks frightful."

"I'm sure it looks far worse than it actually is." Though her heaving stomach belied her words.

Cecilia pursed her lips as a twinkle entered her eyes. "I know what would stop you from being so blue-deviled. Gunter's."

Her lips rose in a weak smile. "I don't think I'm quite up to it."

"Nonsense. You've never turned down his sweets. You are going, even if I have to drag you there."

Winifred groaned and rolled over. "I'm not going."

\* \* \* \*

Winifred sat in the Berkley Square garden under the shade of a maple tree, relishing the sweet ice and the soft air of wonderful weather. Leaning back she sighed as Cecilia ordered another sweet from a passing waiter, who nodded and crossed the busy street to fill her order.

Cecilia leaned back and glanced at her. "You know, you've not said one word about my dress."

Winifred blinked and perused the blue and white-striped morning dress graced with simple lacing on the hem and bodice. "It's nice," she commented blandly.

Her cousin's face collected in a disappointed pout. "It's new. Mother was ever so nice as to pass off my old gowns to the servants and procure some new ones for me."

Winifred nodded as though interested in Cecilia's new wardrobe, but with the throbbing in her head, she doubted she could gather any more enthusiasm.

"You know, you are starting to look better now that you've taken the air," Cecilia said.

She had to agree. Though her head still ached, it wasn't as severe as it had been an hour ago. Although she had to admit direct light did hurt, and she often found herself squinting away from the piercing rays of the sun.

Her gaze flittered across the small crowd of people enjoying Gunther's Tea Shop's confectionary. Several meters away she noticed a man standing beneath a maple, the massive trunk concealing half of his body from her view. A prickle of awareness ran along her skin.

Although his clothes were of high quality, she could guess that he wasn't a peer by the way he held himself. He appeared uncomfortable in his surroundings. Frowning, her gaze sharpened on him. The fellow was staring at her, his brown eyes widened with alarm as his tense body eased further behind the tree.

Alarm sliced into her, and her fingers snapped to Cecilia's wrist. "Cel, do you see that man over there?"

Her cousin's gaze drifted to the man's general direction. "Who?"

"The man behind the tree."

"What of him?"

"He has been staring at us." Her heart beat heavily as she watched him; his gaze flicked over the people nearby before he pushed out from behind the tree and strolled away, his hands behind his back.

"You must be seeing things," Cecilia announced as she accepted her sweet pastry.

Winifred shook her head. There was something about that man that disturbed her. He spied on her, she was sure of it. Pushing to her feet, she treaded along the grass, her eyes never leaving the fellow as he weaved through the crowd and onto the street. Jostling aside another gentleman, she craned her neck to watch him cross the street. Her target pulled further from her sight as a horse and carriage trundled by. A growl of frustration emitted from her lips. Whoever he was, she'd lost him.

## Chapter Twelve

The following morning Winifred rode through Rotten Row. The silence in the dim morning was a cold comfort as she glanced about her. The clapping of her horse's hooves was the only thing that broke into the stiff quietude, the fog adding a sense of foreboding that had her shivering in the cool air.

This was ridiculous. She never had qualms about riding alone. It was the only time when she felt free and uninhibited. She wasn't about to let some phantom menace ruin her enjoyment. She pushed all her qualms to the back of her mind and urged her mount into a canter, the steady clip-clop of the horse a soothing reminder.

She breathed in the thick scent of fresh earth and cool air, a lazy smile on her lips. For some reason the air seemed so much cleaner in the mornings, as though God had reached down and cleansed it by the light of the moon. In the distance she heard the steady hoof beats of another rider, and her languorous mood shriveled into awareness. Her gaze sharpened as she looked around her.

Among the fog she was unable to see the rider, nor his direct location. Her hands gripped the reins until her knuckles turned white in an attempt to stay their trembling. To her right the fog shifted and whirled as she gasped, fumbling for her riding crop and cursing her stubbornness in continuing her rides alone.

As though sensing her distress, her mount danced sideways and nickered. Her heart thumped in her chest as her gaze snapped back to the right. He would know for certain she was here. Gulping hard, she kicked the mare's side, but her disobedient mount side-stepped under her agitation and refused to speed up, tossing its head in defiance.

"Move, you stupid horse," she muttered, hating the tremor in her voice.

The fiery eyes of a black horse emerged from the fog, and she released a short-pitched scream of terror.

"Win."

Winifred's mouth snapped shut as she glared at the rider. Her heart still thumped in her ears and her body shook--from relief or anger, she wasn't sure.

"Do you get some sick pleasure out of scaring me to death?"

He shrugged, his eyes aglitter in the dim light. "I apologize."

She glowered at him. He certainly didn't appear sorry. "What are you doing here?"

Leahaven raised one sardonic brow, a jaunty smile on his lips. "Riding."

"I have been riding here every morning for the last five years and have run into nary a soul. It's the first time I have ever had to deal with another rider. Now, if you'll excuse me...." With a sniff of disdain she urged her mount forward into a canter and felt a stab of annoyance that he chose to follow after her.

She drew her mount to a halt and so did he. "What are you doing?" she asked.

His brows drew together as he cleared his throat. "Escorting you."

"Well, I don't need your assistance. I'm quite capable of taking care of myself,"

she said with a frown of her own.

"No. I'll ensure your safety," he rasped, accentuating each word as though she couldn't understand the gravity of her situation.

She scowled. Of course she knew the danger she was in. The man at Covent Gardens had proved that enough for her, but she wasn't about to let terror control her life. "Suit yourself."

With huff she kicked her mount into action, determined to ignore him as she cantered along the path. Gritting her teeth at the sound of his mount following close by, she leaned forward and urged her mount into a canter. The pace of her horse picked up, and she sat light on her seat. Her gaze flicked back to see him urge his mount forward until he was in line with hers, apparently determined to remain in her presence.

His gaze flicked across their fog-filled surroundings, his features as hard as granite as though he expected a foe to appear from the mist. Rolling her eyes, she snorted, and his attention snapped to her.

"Am I to expect no more solitude in the mornings?"

His head tilted to one side, but he nodded.

"I am quite capable of taking care of myself. I don't require your assistance." The words were like dust in the wind, flimsy and blown away under the force of his gaze and an upturned brow. Oh, how she hated when he did that.

"Well, I don't. I took care of myself five years ago," she said and noted with satisfaction when he cringed.

"That was ... a mistake," he rasped, his lips stiff.

Winifred laughed heartily, though her body was at odds with her. "Come now, sir. You and I both know that."

His eyes pierced her, and she turned her gaze from him in an attempt to regain composure.

"Was it?" he asked.

Winifred's smile felt brittle, and a hollowness filled her veins as she relived the time when she was the most happy, and the time she looked back at with despair. "Of course."

She could feel his gaze on her, burning into her soul, yet she dared not to look at him and confirm it. Thankfully, he remained quiet, and she breathed a small sigh of relief. She didn't know how long she could retain her cheery façade as he stirred old emotions.

Her relationship with her father had been forever severed after his abandonment. She hated her father for being right, but most of all she hated herself for believing Ransom's lies. Like a starved fool she had swallowed all his sweet words, eager to hear more, and when her father discovered her humiliating confrontation he had sent her to the country....

In an act of survival, Winifred kicked her mount into a gallop, hoping to outrun the past dredged up by his return. Leaning forward, she whispered words of encouragement to her horse as it sped along the path, the bitter morning air biting at her cheeks and bringing tears to her eyes. Whether those tears were from the wind or something deeper she didn't want to know. Her breath came out in puffs against the acrimony that welled in her heart.

Ransom's mount appeared beside her, and his hand reached out and grasped her

reins, pulling them to a halt.

Her gaze snapped to his, her body stiff with fury. "What are you doing?"

"I thought...."

"How clear must I be? I don't want you near me."

She tried to jerk her leads from him, yet he held fast, a frown on his brow as he stared at her. Her heart ached, and she knew the instant he saw past her mask and into the vulnerability beneath.

"Was it a mistake?" he asked slowly.

Winifred felt her lips tremble. She bit down, and the physical pain helped cement her in reality as she glared at him. "What do you want, Lord Leahaven? Do you want me to say that I forgive you for what you did, to alleviate your guilt? To say that it wasn't a mistake?"

"Very well, I forgive you." She sneered. "Thank you for teaching me a lesson about men."

His eyes widened at her biting tone, and his hand released the leads. "No," he whispered.

"No? No what, my lord? No, that men aren't like you? That you didn't mean to lie to me?"

His shoulders drooped as a sigh slipped from his lips, looking almost dejected.

"Tell me, sir," she said, unable to stop herself, unable to stop the masochistic need to flay her heart. "Did you and your friends laugh at me, think it was just a lark that you managed to fool the Marquis of Samford's daughter?"

"No."

She laughed, a cold grating sound that echoed in the dim light and sounded sinister and somewhat crazed even to her ears. "Come now, I. I heard the rumors of the bet. I do hope the money was well worth it."

He stiffened in his seat, and his gaze sharpened on her.

"You didn't think I knew about it?" she said with an almost maniacal laugh.

"Imagine my surprise when not only did the man that I lo--that I foolishly believed in not only lied to me, but he also *used* me for monetary gain."

"I didn't ... use you." His features contorted as though pained.

"Don't give me that faradiddle. Imagine my surprise when I discovered that you--the great Earl--was on the ropes. Pity you believed my lies. You could've had an easy way out of your financial woes," she said, in an attempt to hurt him as he hurt her.

He eyes widened at her words, then softened into a sympathy that brought her burning rage to the fore. Her lips curled in a sneer. "You fooled me once before, my lord. It shan't happen again."

With that she kicked her horse forward and allowed the mist to swallow her. This time, he didn't follow her.

\* \* \* \*

Ransom stared over the banister at Vauxhall. His gaze latched on Winifred, standing next to her cousin. The smile on her lips appeared forced, the glitter of joy lost in her eyes. He sighed and dipped his head forward. Had he truly hurt her? He didn't like the idea that his previous actions had truly killed the flame within her.

"My, my, what has you all blue-deviled?"

He jerked his gaze up at Lady Neely and scowled as she swished toward him in

her fashionable ball gown of burgundy and black, a smile on her lips. Pushing off the banister he turned and leant back to watch her approach.

She glanced over his shoulder into the crowd below. A brow rose in interest, and he knew without a doubt who had caught her attention. "Well, well. Who would've thought our dear bird would drag you out of hiding."

He glowered at her amused expression, not at all appreciating her all-knowing glance. "I'm not hiding."

She nodded as though she were but humoring him, and it sent a stab of annoyance through him. "Indeed? It's that the reason you haven't moved from this spot since you arrived?"

His jaw clenched at the truth behind her words, hating the fact that when it came to Winifred he was quite transparent.

She chuckled. Her soft hand touched his sleeve, and her eyes twinkled with mirth. "Come now, you may not be able to speak, but when it comes to her your body always gives you away."

"What do you want?" he rasped out.

She chuckled. "Why, nothing. I did hear about your ... conversation this morning."

His lips thinned as he looked away from Lady Neely's merry eyes. Did she think this was all a game? That every moment with Winifred wouldn't set an ache in his heart? He drew in measured breaths at the burning rage mingled with resentment that settled in his stomach like a bitter pill. His hands clenched in fists as he glared at her, his mouth refusing to cooperate as he attempted to utter a phrase. "Go ... to ... the devil."

She recoiled with dramatic flair, her dancing eyes at odds with the rest of her body. "*Tsk, tsk.* You know those confrontations are medicine to the soul."

Ransom rolled his eyes. Determined not to stand and listen to her cryptic sentences, he strode away, yet she remained tenacious and followed after him. Her fingers wrapped around his arm and drew him to a halt.

"I don't mean just for her, Leavahaven. I also mean for you," she said. "When you were part of that trio, you concealed your true self from everyone--most of all yourself. You must confront what happened to you."

At the mention of the past, his heart thumped in his chest, and he jerked his arm from her grasp. Fury burned in him, and he knew that a black rage would follow should he stay. He gasped at the repressed rage that rolled through him, fighting to be revealed.

"Must you hound me so?" he growled.

Lady Neely's eyes widened. Her hand covered her open mouth, and he knew he had shocked her. Visual images of violence flashed through his mind and washed through him. He had to leave lest he do some real damage.

He pushed past several patrons as he stormed from the room, the blackness creeping along the edge of his vision. He stumbled down the stairs and along the gravel path, his wish to hide choking him with its intensity. Gasping, he struggled with his cravat and pulled it loose as he searched for a secluded spot.

Like a rousing beast the rage stirred. The flames of its breath licked his skin and churned in his stomach, his efforts to control it wavering under its force. He moved further from the music and the crowds that strolled through the paths.

He slipped behind a small alcove and drew in harsh breaths, his attention focused

on the night sounds that drifted on the cool air. Clenching his fists, the muscles in his body contracted as the sound of approaching steps drew his attention.

"We're lost." At Winifred's voice his breath caught and his eyes snapped open. He turned his head in her direction.

"We're not," replied another voice, decidedly masculine.

Concealed by the foliage, he could easily listen to her, yet he was unable control the jealousy that surged through him. His rage fed on it like a starved animal. Swallowing hard, he shook his head and focused on their interaction.

"We most certainly are. You assured me you knew where we were going."

Ransom's teeth gritted together at her words. What was she doing alone with another man, and in Vauxhall no less? He growled in pent-up fury.

"Come now, m'dear, you knew full well where we were going."

Winifred gasped. "I most certainly did not! You approached me, sir. Had we not lost my cousin we wouldn't be discussing this."

The gentleman chuckled. "Don't act all innocent with me. I've seen the way you fawned over me. You're a ripe peach ready for the plucking."

Gravel shifted underfoot and the sound of a gloved hand hitting flesh brought him to instant awareness. This had gone far enough. Stepping out from his alcove, he saw Winifred struggling in the arms of Lord Balker, who had tilted her back in an attempt to kiss her. Her hands hit his shoulders to no avail.

With a growl he ate up the distance between them. His hand hooked around the fellow's shoulder and pulled him back. Lord Balker lost his hold on Winifred as Ransom whirled him around and planted a facer in the drunkard's face.

The fat lord tumbled back and fell on his backside dazed. He blinked up at him, blood seeping from his nose. "I say, what is all this about?"

Ransom clenched his fists in an attempt to hold himself at bay as the man pushed to his feet. "She's a lady."

Lord Balker touched his nose and grimaced. "A lady? She was alone at Vauxhall."

Gravel shifted as Winifred scrambled to her feet. "I most certainly was not."

Ransom's eyes narrowed on Lord Balker. "Watch yourself."

"Watch myself? She was the one acting like some doxy. Desperate for my attention, lacking no decency."

"You liar!" Winifred launched herself at Lord Balker and only managed to strike him once in the arm before Lehaven interceded. His arms wrapped about her waist and brought her against his body.

She struggled for only a moment before her fingers bit into his hand and he released her.

Balker sniffed with disdain, and Ransom stiffened. "You never had anything to fear from me. Who wants a fat ape-leader anyway?"

In an instant and without thought, Ransom launched himself at Balker and knocked him to the ground. Balker's head snapped back when his fist made contact, his fury unleashed as he pounded into him again and again.

Balker's weak attempt to fight back faltered under the force of his rage. After another punch to his jaw, the drunken lord groaned and tipped back into unconsciousness. With his fist raised in the air Ransom hesitated, the rage still burning, yet the satisfaction



of venting was lost as soon as the fool was unable to fight back.

Groaning at the emotions that still trembled through his body, he stumbled back and ran shaking hands through his hair. The blood on Balker's face pulled images forth that he had long fought to control and eradicate from his mind.

The sound of movement behind him snapped him from his daze, and he whirled around, his fist raised ready to strike. Through the haze of fury he saw Winifred flinch, and he brought his arm down slowly. Clenching his teeth, he battled for power over his turbulent emotions. His chest heaved with the effort as his gaze fixated on her.

She looked up at him with glazed eyes. A small tear leaked from her eye as she clutched her arms around her body.

"He lied," he rasped.

Her chin rose a fraction at his words, and her lips thinned in an irrefutable line. "I hardly care what that buffoon said."

His heart ached at the sight of her vulnerability. He wished he could take her in his arms and show her how beautiful she truly was. He clenched his hands together in an attempt to stay his impulses as he stared at her. Words whirled about his head and taunted him with his incapacity to form them.

Her gaze flicked about them in a nervous gesture, and her hands rubbed her arms as though to stay a chill. "Well, if you'll excuse me."

She moved to step past him. His arm shot out and his fingers gripped her upper arm, producing a gasp from her.

Luminescent dark pools gazed up at him, swimming with confusion, fear and ... longing. His heart thumped in his chest at the sight. He knew desire when he saw it, and he saw it now, like a sputtering flame in her eyes. Wrapping his arms about her, he tipped his head forward. His lips brushed hers, and their breaths mingled before he placed a gentle, reverent kiss upon those soft lips.

Like a man tasting the rays of the sun after years of darkness, he reveled in the warmth her mouth offered as his tongue slid tentatively along the seams and slipped inside. He brushed his hands along her arms, and his nerve endings came alive like delicious fire as he re-lit the flames of passion within her.

A small moan emanated from her and he responded alike, his ardor raised tenfold as he increased the pressure of his lips on her. Her response sent sparks of desire through him and held him in awe. Her tongue touched his and slid along in a battle for dominance, and he groaned. Years of dreaming of this didn't compare to the real thing, and he wished for it to never end. His fingers tightened around waist and squeezed, oh so softly.

His wonderful, succulent angel. He pulled away from her. His eyes roamed her face and observed with a fair amount of pleasure her heavy-lidded eyes glazed with passion. He kissed the edge of her lips and trailed along her jawline as she breathed his name, the name that he longed to hear her utter in the throes of desire.

Without compunction he trailed his kisses along her neck and gently grazed her collarbone with his teeth, producing a gasp from her. Her hands slipped up his back as he nuzzled her neck and splayed out in his hair and curled among his locks....

Sharp pain pulled at his head as she jerked his hair. At the sudden sting he loosened his grip on her. She stumbled back, her eyes flashing with uninhibited fury. "How dare you take advantage of me!"

Ransom rubbed the back of his tender skull and stared at her, battling with his remorse and the pent-up passion that ached in his chest. He dropped his arms and held out his hands in entreaty. Indeed, he should not have done what he had, yet he didn't feel any guilt for it.

"I'm not some woman that allows men to paw her like some immoral ... doxy. You should be ashamed of yourself." She passed him a look of icy disdain and flounced off.

Ransom smiled as she turned the corner and disappeared into the darkness. She wasn't as impregnable as he had first feared and that gave him some measure of joy. Now, the question was how to make her fall in love with him--he glanced down at Lord Balker's unconscious form--and dispose of this body.

## Chapter Thirteen

Winifred stormed from the gardens in a huff, her stride purposeful yet lacking direction as she turned corner after corner in an attempt to weave her way from the Great Walk. Laughter drifted on the air nearby followed by another more masculine voice, and she shivered in response.

Had she not lost Cecelia this whole debacle wouldn't have happened. She trudged along the path ignoring the stitch that formed just below her chest until it became impossible to continue. Leaning up against the thick hedge, she pressed her hand against the dull ache that pulsed in her side and swallowed hard against her dry throat.

He had kissed her. And to make matters worse, she had enjoyed it. Even now in the seclusion of the foliage, she could still smell his masculine scent that clung to her clothing and her skin. Images of the past flashed before her, and she groaned, shutting her eyes in an attempt to regain control. Yet all it achieved was to solidify in her mind what had happened, his smooth warm body against hers, his soft mouth....

"Stop it," she growled.

Frustration surged within her and self-hate that burned in her stomach and set burning tears behind her eyes. A week ago she was right with everything in the world. She went to balls, she danced, she laughed, and now with the return of her one true lo-- she pressed her fingers into her stitch.

What she felt for him was nothing more than some silly infatuation. She focused on him, the way he spoke. His snobbish, abrupt sentences that were always spoken as though she were some clodpole that needed slow, enunciated words. She didn't need his explanations or looks of sympathy from him. Never would he--or anyone else for the matter--play her for the fool.

Chewing on her lip in an attempt to remove the feel of his lips, she ran her hands over her body. No longer the fat widgeon, it still stung to have someone point out her not quite slim form. She sniffled and curled her lip in disdain. She would *never* give Ransom or Lord Balker the satisfaction of crumbling into a watering pot.

Blinking back hot tears, she armed herself with anger, allowing the burning emotion to warm her and dry out her eyes. Her lips thinned, and she drew in a harsh breath through her nose.

Ransom's unique scent wafted over her ... his soft hands and wondrous lips ... With a growl of frustration, she pushed off the hedge and shuffled down the path, determined to find safety in the light. The dim lanterns did nothing to control her fear of the demons of the past as her pace increased.

\* \* \* \*

"I think I'm in love!"

Sitting in her drawing room, Winifred choked on her tea at her cousin's impassioned statement. Coughing, she gently set her drink aside and stared at Cecilia in disbelief. She glanced at Elizabeth, who grinned over her cup before taking a sip.

"In love? With whom?"

"Lord Hamilton."

"I don't see why you would be interested in him. Everyone is steering clear of him due to that recent scandal," Winifred said.

"Scandals are delicious," Elizabeth put in.

Shooting Lady Neely a scathing stare, she turned her attention back to her cousin. "I'm only saying this because I care."

"Oh, but he said some wonderful things about me. He said that I have a wonderful bone structure and delicate skin."

"Delicate skin." Winifred's eyes narrowed on Cecilia. "Did you allow this man to touch you?"

"Mm, do tell." Elizabeth leaned forward in her seat.

"Well, he only touched my cheek."

"You do remember what happened to Lord Strathburg's daughter don't you?" Winifred asked.

Cecilia's face fell, and her fingers played with the lacy hem of her sleeve. "He was ever so nice to me. He surely must be misunderstood."

Winifred rolled her eyes. "Yes, I'm sure he might be. But you know your mother would never approve of the match."

"Like your father didn't approve of yours?"

Both Winifred and Cecilia gasped at the remark simultaneously.

"Oh, I'm awfully sorry, Winnie" Cecilia said, her hand reaching out and clasping Winifred's in earnest. "It was badly done of me. I wasn't thinking. I was terribly, terribly rude and foolish."

Winifred smile felt brittle as she attempted to conceal the hurt that pulsed through her body at the reminder of her foolishness. "It's quite all right."

"No, no, it isn't."

Thankfully Lady Neely moved in to fill the void.

"By the by, Cecilia, where did you meet this Lord Hamilton?"

Cecilia dipped her head and blushed. "At Vauxhall Gardens."

Elizabeth giggled. "My dear, you didn't get caught in some secluded alcove did you?"

"No! After I lost Winnie and Lord Balker, Lord Hamilton was nice enough to lead me out of the gardens."

Elizabeth's gaze pierced into Winifred. "You were lost with Lord Balker?"

Heated indignation ran over her face at the mention of that man. "I don't want to talk about that buffoon."

Cecilia frowned. "Actually, when you did emerge from the gardens you were quite alone. What happened?"

"Methinks, our dear bird here had a little tête-à-tête--and not with Lord Balker."

Her indignation melted into a blush of dismay at Lady Neely's comment. "I most certainly did not!"

Elizabeth giggled. "My dear, come now. You can tell us who he was--we shan't whisper another word of it."

Cecilia nodded, enthused. Her eyes gleamed behind her spectacles.

"I did *not* have a tête-à-tête."

"My dear, you are a poor liar. You know, I do believe Lord Leahaven was there

that night. Did you run into him at all?"

"N--no."

Cecelia's eyes widened as her mouth formed a silent "oh". "You were with Lord Leahaven?"

Winifred's lips thinned at the mention of Ransom. "I didn't plan a rendezvous, if that is what you're implying."

"Why, we're not implying that at all. But we are just tickled by the notion that you spent a moonlit moment with a member of the Devil's trio," Elizabeth said.

"How romantic," Cecilia whispered.

Winifred glowered at the two. "Have you ladies forgotten what he did?"

Cecilia glanced at Lady Neely. "Well, he did save you when you were about to be abducted."

"That hardly clears him of his sins," Winifred said with a tilt to her chin. She couldn't believe her two closest friends were now his champions.

"You protest far too much, my dear. Some might think that you retain some feeling for the gentleman," Lady Neely said.

Winifred recoiled at Elizabeth's statement, yet she couldn't find the words to rebut her. Had his cruel taunts and cold behavior only wounded her pride, but not her love for him? She couldn't believe that after the hurt and humiliation she felt something for him still. Yet, the proof was there.

His skillful seduction last night had removed her capacity for thought. Had his teeth not brushed along her skin, she didn't know how far she would've allowed it to go.

"My dear, whatever has you in a dither?"

Winifred was pulled from her musings and stared back at Elizabeth's amused visage. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Why, what has you blushing like some fresh-faced gel?"

The butler entered the room, thankfully saving her from a reply. "A messenger to see you, my lady."

"Show him in."

A young lad in livery strode into the room. His gaze flickered among them and finally settled on her. "For you madam," he said, and held out a small spray.

Accepting the bouquet, she observed that it was a simple arrangement of only one type of flower. The red camellia. She touched the delicate petals with a frown of bemusement. *You are a flame in my heart*. The meaning of the flower burned into her, leaving her no doubt who this *gift* was from.

Her lips settled in a thin line, as she stood and handed it back to the boy who stared down at it in confusion.

"I shan't be accepting any gifts from Lord Leahaven." She strode over to the table, pulled out a parchment, and wrote a quick note, which she handed to the boy. "And you may give this to him also."

Without another word, the lad bowed awkwardly as Winifred ushered him from the room. Her friends' titters of delight were indication enough of what they thought.

Opening the door, she thanked the lad for his time and watched him stumble down the stairs and scurry away. She sighed, and leaned against the doorframe. What was she to do? Her common sense and her will demanded her to remain strong, yet her heart ... her foolish heart yearned for something that was but a dream.

She could still smell the delicate fragrance of the soft camellia, and she tilted her chin to find a lone flower resting at her feet. Hesitating for but a fraction, she stooped to pick it up and breathed in its scent with a soft sigh. Her wayward heart lifted with an unrelenting joy that she was unable to stifle.

Twirling the flower in her fingers, her gaze ran over the traffic that trundled by. Her attention shifted to a lone figure that stood across the road, and cold trepidation sliced through her. With trembling fingers, she grasped the door and eased it shut as though she hadn't noticed him. Leaning against the door, she gasped, her heart beating in her ears.

"Winnie, whatever is amiss?" asked Cecelia

She snapped her attention toward the drawing room to find Lady Neely and Cecelia standing just beyond the threshold.

"There's a man out there."

Both women hurried to her side while Cecilia peeked out the nearest window. "Why, it's the same fellow from Gunther's."

Winifred gulped at the panic that settled in her stomach. Her body felt weak and drained, even though she had done nothing more than close the door.

Cecilia pulled back from the window. "It's perfectly all right. He's gone now."

That reassurance didn't do anything for her. She raised a hand to her head, her heart beating in her ears.

"Why you're looking a bit green around the gills. Do you require salts?" Elizabeth asked, her brown eyes swimming with concern.

Winifred shook her head and held out her hand. "No, no. I'm quite recovered."

"You hardly look it, my dear. Come, a spot of tea will do you wonders. I'm sure it was just a coincidence."

"Yes, a coincidence," Winifred repeated, holding onto that phrase, though deep down believing it not to be true at all.

\* \* \* \*

Ransom twirled the flower in his fingers and remained somber in mood as he weighed his next action. Indeed, he hadn't expected her to return his bouquet, but he found her letter quite refreshing, smiling softly as he reread it.

*To treat me as you have and then think flowers would sway me to your side! You must think me quite the fool. I shan't be accepting anything more from you. And I do stress the word. Anything!!*

He found her elegant scrawl and scathing retort delightful. The soft parchment carried with it her soft scent of apple and cinnamon, and he brushed his fingers along the paper before setting it down. Leaning back on his chair, he stared absently out the window and pondered the night before. His smile dissipated at the memory of Lady Neely's words.

He had a life long ago where he did things without forethought or consequence--until it was too late. Standing, he strode over to the side table and poured himself a brandy, the soft amber liquid reflecting the light against the smooth oak.

He turned and walked back to the window and stared over the street. Mayfair. An elegant townhouse, one that he afforded with ease and gave him high status, yet he cared not at all.

He wanted Winifred. Having tasted the passion she still harbored for him, he

found that he wanted more. Wanted all of her. No longer was he satisfied with mentions of her in the papers or the memories that had taunted him for years. He held heaven in his arms and like a man cast from it, he felt despondent and yearned for her light to shine on him again.

A knock on the door brought his morose thoughts to a halt and he glanced over his shoulder at Percival.

"A Lady Samford to see you, my lord."

Ransom turned and inclined his head. He moving to stand in front of his desk and waited patiently as Lady Samford glided into the room. He doubted that she would greet him warmly.

In the past five years, the woman had barely changed save for a few extra lines around her eyes and the slight darkening of her hair. Her eyes, so much like Winifred's, flashed at him with disdain.

He motioned for her to sit, and she did so without question, her strides strong to show her pique. Her green striped gown flared as she sat, and she arranged it with careful jerks of her hand. Sauntering over, he slid into the chair across from her and waited, his hands clasped around his glass.

The woman stared at him, her aquamarine eyes traveling over his features as though some secret was written upon his visage. She appeared calm, yet her actions were stiff and her lips formed a thin line. He waited patiently to hear what she had to say.

"I've waited five years to see you," she said finally, her eyes hardened into glaciers. "You hurt my family."

His smile disappeared at her words, and a vast cavernous hole welled up inside him. He knew this. He lived with this knowledge all the days of his life. He swallowed hard, and his grip tightened on his cup.

Her chin raised a fraction, and she pierced him with a cold glare. "Your pathetic actions hurt my daughter. She was such a delicate creature and so loving and giving. You destroyed it in one fell swoop of your cocksure nature and selfish ways. You used her softness for your own amusement--"

"Not ... my ... amusement," he rasped.

"Not yours?" she scoffed. "Then for your friend's amusement. You pandered to her and to me, making me believe you had honorable intentions, but most of all making Winifred believe.

"She was ready to give up everything for you. Everything. But you--you stepped on her heart. She felt loved and special and even stood up against her father for you. But you didn't care. Not one whit."

Ransom stood, unable to take much more. Striding to the other side of the room he swallowed the rest of his brandy, hoping it would give him strength. His chest ached with repressed pain that reverberated through his body. "I cared." *More than you know.*

Lady Samford stood and followed after him. "About yourself, perhaps, and your own self-worth that you would destroy another's."

Ransom shook his head.

"Yes! You did. You threw eggs at her and rotten fruit when it would've been the happiest moment of my daughter's life. You laughed at her when she tried to get back in the house. Yes, I was there. I saw everything."

Ransom slid his glass on top of the table and rested his palms of the cool wood.

Anything to hold him together. Anything to ease the throbbing agony in his heart.

"She loved you," Lady Samford whispered raggedly. "She loved you because she believed your stupid little lies and believed the best of you. Does it make you feel like a man to know that you can destroy another human being?"

His hands tightened over the table, and the edges dug into his skin as he controlled the urge to upend the table. "No." *I didn't want it to end that way.*

"No? I doubt that, my lord. I heard about your antics afterwards. The carousing and dueling. Flaunting your carefree ways while my daughter cried herself to sleep every night. Every. Night."

The image of Winifred's tears cut into him, and he shook his head in an attempt to dislodge it from him.

"Deny it all you want. I don't know how you can sleep at night with what you did to her. How can you think that you can just waltz back into her life and she would fall in your arms again? Is it some sick bet that you have made with yourself to hound my daughter to submission? To take everything from her that she has tried so hard to regain?"

His chest heaved with the effort to maintain control. His jaw clenched as the words he wished to utter choked him. He pierced Lady Samford with a stare, and she paused long enough in her tirade to step back, a flicker of uncertainty in her eyes.

"I ... " The words failed to come forth, and he felt he was suffocating on them as his throat closed up. *I love her. I love her with all my soul, and I gave it up for her.*

Lady Samford stood taller, her shoulders drawn back in determination. "I won't let you hurt her again. I simply won't allow it. Don't come near my daughter, you scoundrel."

She twirled on her heel and stormed from the room, leaving him in a whirl of emotions. With a growl of frustration, he swiped the table clean, glass shattering as it hit the floor. His anger unabated, he gasped for air. His shoulder tensed as he upended the table and punched a hole in the wall. His knuckles came away bloodied, but he didn't feel the pain through the agony in his chest.

\* \* \* \*

The following morning Winifred strolled through Hyde Park, her arm wrapped around Cecilia's as they enjoyed the warm rays of the sun. Smiling, she cast her attention at the robins that fluttered in the branches above and the squirrels scrounging along the floor. Today was a time filled with simple pleasures and unequivocal joy.

She tried not to think about the reappearance of that strange fellow the day before.

Yet no matter how she tried, she found it difficult not to keep her mind from the strange occurrences that filled her with questions and fear. Who was that man? He didn't look at all familiar to her, yet the man that attacked her did. Could the two be connected in any way? Her musings were brought to a halt as Cecilia tugged on her elbow.

"Oh, look over there. I do believe that is Lord Hamilton." She tittered.

Winifred rolled her eyes. "We are not about to walk over there and introduce ourselves. It's not proper."

Cecilia's face scrunched in disappointment and distaste. "Oh, pooh on propriety. Mother is ever so tight-laced. It's no wonder no one has approached me with their suit."

The reason why Cecilia was unwed was partly due to the fact that her mother



often objected to those that her daughter set her cap at. But in all honesty, it was little wonder, as often those gentlemen had scandal attached to their names or were quite on the ropes.

At her cousin's expectant expression and eyes glistening with uninhibited joy, Winifred ceded to her cousin's demand and followed her up the path toward Lord Hamilton, who strolled along the path by himself. Lord Hamilton was often seen strolling alone, lost in thought as though pondering the fate of the world. He was doing so now, his gaze fixed on the ground, his strides long and purposeful as though to outstride his thoughts.

"My lord! Fancy seeing you here," Cecilia gushed.

Lord Hamilton's gaze shot up, and he jerked to a halt as though tugged on by a rope. His brown eyes widened and a soft smile broke over his features. A handsome gentleman, it was little wonder why Cecilia fell for his charms.

"Lady Cecilia," he greeted with a short bow. "Fancy that. How are you this fine day?"

Cecilia giggled, her gloved hand raised to her lips. "I am quite well, thank you, my lord. May I introduce you to my cousin, Lady Winifred?"

He turned to her then and bowed. "Charmed."

"I trust you had pleasant time at Vauxhall," Cecilia said.

Hamilton nodded. "Indeed, I did."

They all fell into silence, and Winifred shifted from foot to foot. Her gaze wandered again and she caught a glimmer of movement. Her focus sharpened on a particular gentleman that snapped his morning paper open and concealed his features from view.

Her instincts stirred to life as she noticed little things about him that were familiar. The paper lowered. She caught the top half of his features and gasped.

It was the man.

Fear mingled with indignant fury whirled within her. There was simply nothing to be afraid of. The man hardly appeared sinister, and though he had presented no threat to her physically, she couldn't bring herself to approach him, her knees quaking at the thought.

Grasping her cousin's arm, she drew her close. "It's him," she whispered at Cecilia's mumbled protest.

Cecilia eyes widened, and she glanced off to where Winifred pointed, her fingers adjusting her glasses. "My goodness, it is. Whatever shall we do?"

Hamilton frowned. "Whatever is amiss?"

"That man over there has been following us," Cecilia said.

He looked over his shoulder at the gentleman. "Are you certain?"

"Yes, I'm quite positive," Winifred said. "Good day, my lord."

Her cousin cried in dismay as she dragged her along, scurrying down the path away from her stalker. Cutting through the crowd, she veered off to the right, glancing over her shoulder as she did so.

Though he was a fair distance from them, the fact that he had abandoned his paper and stood scanning the crowd pierced her with anxiety. Surely he didn't plan to accost her in public?

"What are you doing?" Cecilia asked, as Winifred dragged her along, her hand on

her bonnet.

"That man is following me. We have to find someone to help us."

"Lord Hamilton was there. He could've helped us, surely."

Winifred ducked off the path and into a gathering of trees before hiding behind a large oak and drawing her cousin in beside her. "I hardly know the man. I doubt he would have believed that man was following me."

"If he's any type of gentleman, which I assure you he is, he would have assisted you."

Ignoring her cousin's indignant huffs, she turned and rested flush against the trunk as she peeked into the crowd beyond. The gentleman was in the thick of it. His gaze flitted across the crowd, his search almost frantic as he raked his hand through his hair. Turning in a full circle, he appeared frustrated with his fruitless hunt and stormed off.

Pursing her lips in determination, she eased from behind the tree and dragged Cecilia with her, her eyes never leaving the gentleman.

"Whatever are you doing?"

"I'm following that man."

Cecilia gasped. "Have you gone queer in the attic? He might well be your attacker and you want to follow him?"

Winifred didn't stop as her cousin tugged on her arm. "I doubt that man is, but he's involved with whoever has been terrorizing me."

"This is madness."

It was. Why would she contemplate putting herself within arms reach of the scoundrel that has been intimidating her with his cowardly attacks?

The fellow followed the path as though he had a purpose, his strides leading him toward Rotten Row. It was clear to her that the fellow had a purpose as he paused on the side of the path and scanned the road. Scooting behind the safety of another tree, she peered over at him and wondered how long she would have to wait.

Apparently not too long, as a moment later a rider appeared along the path. Winifred's fury bubbled and soared, and her head swam with rage at seeing Lord Leahaven.

## Chapter Fourteen

She couldn't believe it! Riding on his sleek black horse was none other than Lord Leahaven, his expression set in a cold mask as he reined in his mount beside the fellow and dismounted.

"I lost her."

Ransom glowered at the gentleman's words, then after a short silence he said, "How?"

"She saw me, my lord. I am hardly equipped to handle such a task. Surely you can hire someone else?"

Hire someone? Winifred gasped. Was it he that was behind all these strange occurrences? Her mind worked at a furious pace as she lined it all up. The first incident happened not long after his arrival to London--that he hadn't ventured out of his home at that time was hardly the point. The bolting horse, the attack outside Covent Gardens, and finally Lord Balker. All these things had one thing in common. Ransom. Lord Leahaven coming to her rescue.

Fury lashed at her and burnt away all reason as she dashed out from behind the tree. "I cannot believe your audacity," she raged as she stormed up to him.

His gaze snapped to her and widened in alarm, his body tensing at her approach.

"How dare you! Sending men after me to cause me to fear for my very life."

His brows shot down in a bemused frown, and Winifred's hand tightened on her parasol lest she cause him physical damage.

"I hardly think your display of innocence is going to fool me," she said, eying him with contempt, her lip curled in disgust. "I see the game you are playing. Making my horse bolt, then appearing out of nowhere like some errant knight in shining armor. The attack into Covent Gardens. I don't know how you managed to get Lord Balker to go along with your scheme but I hardly care. I've discovered your ruse. I should have expected no better from a rogue such as you."

His gaze passed to the gentleman before him as though imploring him to speak.

"Ah, there is no ruse, madam," the gentleman put in, his index finger pointed in the air like a tentative child before a governess.

Winifred snorted at the idea, her fury raised a notch as she stared at Ransom's unmoving visage. Had he nothing to say in his defense? "Well, my lord?"

He looked at her, his eyes flaring with an emotion she couldn't decipher. Was it ... frustration? Whatever for?

"No, no, my lady," the small man said. "It's not at all what you think. Lord--"

"Percival," Ransom rasped, his frustration revealed by the weight of his tone.

Winifred crossed her arms, her parasol dangling to one side as she waited for an explanation. Any would do, so she could throw it back in his face. He stared at her for a long moment. His twilight eyes pierced her and sent a tendril of unease through her. Determined to remain undaunted, she tipped her chin higher and drew in a sharp breath, readying for battle.

His Adam apple bobbed as his lips settled in a stiff line. Clearing his throat, he adjusted his cravat while her fury began to wane into annoyance.

"It's clear to me that you have nothing to say in your defense. Good day." She turned to leave, but thought better of it and glanced over her shoulder to pass one final cutting remark. "Oh, and do consider paying someone the next time you want to terrorize a woman to have her fall in your arms. This bumble-head of yours wouldn't scare a mouse."

His hand shot out and grasped her elbow as she began to move away. His fingers bit into her skin and elicited a gasp from her as he whirled her back to face him. No longer were his features set in unmovable lines. His lips curled in ire, his eyes flashing with unrelenting indignation. "I don't ... terrorize."

Winifred laughed forcibly, concealing the momentary fear that flared to life at his anger. "If you say so, my lord."

His brows drew together at her sarcasm. "Protecting ... you."

"Protecting me? Come now, my lord. You are a terrible liar. With a faux threat, of course that may look like what you are doing. But I am hardly that fool. Good day, sir."

She tugged her arm for release, but when his finger bit further into her skin, dread soaked her blood like ice as she swallowed at the lump that formed in her throat. Surely he wouldn't try anything dishonorable now that she had discovered his ruse.

She looked into eyes that glimmered like the darkest night with his fury. The violence that emanated from him gave her pause. The deep tone of a ringing bell rang in her head like a warning to her folly, and she found herself unable to do more than stare.

"You ... think that?" His lips curled in stiff lines as he spoke.

She licked her lips. "Should I not?"

"No."

She drew in a sharp breath at his harsh response. She jerked her arm hard, and his grasp loosened enough for her to stumble back. Righting herself, she glared at him, her breath coming in erratic puffs.

"You--" Her words were cut off by a loud pop, and Ransom dove at her, knocking her to the ground. Stars flared behind her eyes as she hit the ground, the air leaving her body in a gush as pain reverberated through her.

Dazed she stared up at Leahaven, his head raised as he stared at something in the distance. The heat of his body penetrated her clothes and melted her indignation. He shifted and pulled back slightly to look at her, a concerned frown on his brow. His eyes flared with heated emotions, and her mouth parted in surprise as images of his mouth and what it could do flickered before her. Molten desire whirled in the pit of her stomach.

Her breath caught in her throat. She could feel his racing heartbeat against her skin. The heat of his body permeated through her and released pent-up desire that unfurled like a flower in the rays of the sun. Swallowing hard, she found herself staring at his lips ... wanting ... wishing....

His gaze flickered and his head lowered a fraction as though asking her permission. Oh, she wanted to, but her commonsense reared its ugly head, and the sound of clopping hooves brought her crashing back into reality.

"Get off me, you great buffoon!" She hit him in the side of the arm with a closed fist.

His brows drew together, his lip curled in annoyance as he complied and held his hand down to assist her. She eyed the hand with disdain and stood on her own.

"Are you mad?" she cried. "How dare you attack me like that. You scoundrel." She swung her parasol and hit him in the side of the arm. "Beast!" She hit him again. "Oaf!" Then again.

His eyes widened, and the fire within those depths terrified her as he ripped her new parasol from her grasp and snapped it over his knee. She gasped in dismay, as he flung it from him.

His chest heaved, his lips pursed in a thin line as he glared at her. "Don't!"

"You broke my parasol."

"You ... hit me," he said, his lips stiff with fury.

He said the truth, but Winifred raised her chin and ground her teeth lest she let out a biting retort. With a huff she turned on her heel and stalked away. Her gaze snapped to the wood that had splintered from a tree trunk not far from where she stood, and she faltered to a stop.

The fresh beige tinge of the wood, the connection to the popping sound earlier mingled with Ransom's bodily dive on her ... She frowned, and a sinking sensation opened in her stomach as her mind whirled. Had someone tried to shoot her?

When she turned to confront Leahaven, he had already mounted his horse and cantered off. Was Ransom trying to save her life?

\* \* \* \*

The evening came with its own woes, as Ransom sat in his chair and stared sightlessly into the burning embers. Someone had shot at Winifred. Familiar with the sound of gunshots, he found himself reliving the horror that was Hougoumont Château.

He clenched his teeth as cries from the past whirled through his head. The long repressed stench of blood mingled with gunpowder burned his nostrils. With trembling fingers he clutched his head in an attempt to still the images that tormented him.

Pain ached in the back of his head, a throbbing reminder that set his heart racing with the sickening adrenaline of war, relived in horrific slow motion. The cries of the French intermingled with the British troops rang in his ears. A sick sense of dread and foreboding reemerged at the beginning of a flashback.

A glass of brandy appeared before him, and he looked up to find the concerned visage of Lady Neely.

Accepting the glass without question, he wrapped his trembling fingers about it and squeezed. She glided away and sat in the chair across from him, a soft sigh of satisfaction slipping past her lips. He had long ago stopped questioning how or why she kept appearing in his townhouse. He suspected that she was lonely--much like him.

With a swallow of the smooth liquid, he sighed and leaned back, thankful for the company, yet dreading what she had come to say.

She eyed him for a moment, and he shifted, discomfited by her enigmatic stare. "So, I hear you had a little rendezvous with our dear bird. Quite scandalous of you."

Ransom frowned. Rendezvous? What the devil was she on about?

"Me thinks Winifred is quite moved by your seductive prowess."

His brows rose at her words as realization dawned. Surely she wasn't talking about Vauxhall?

"So tell me, was Lord Balker objectionable?" she asked.

He scowled at the mention of that drunkard. That fool wasn't good enough to lick Winifred's shoes.

"Oh, I see he caused you some trouble ... interesting," she said with a sly glimmer in her eye. Her fingers tempted together and touched her lips as she passed him a measured stare.

"What?" he growled after an extended silence.

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking that what you did today was quite heroic."

His lips twisted in a wry grin. Heroic? His legs were barely able to hold him up after he dove at Winifred, let alone mount his horse. He raised his glass in a mock salute and took a swallow.

Lady Neely tipped her head to the side, her brows lowered in contemplation. "By the by, you seem to have a talent for appearing in places to save the day."

His smile disappeared. Did she believe he was responsible for the attacks now? That it was some convoluted plot to get her to fall in love with him? What a ridiculous notion. He leaned forward a fraction when Lady Neely remained silent and shook his head incredulously.

She crossed her arms over her chest at his furious stare, a brow raised in condescension. "Well, can you hardly blame her? You sent a spy after her."

Percival? A spy? The notion was laughable. "Percival?"

"Well, whatever did you think you would achieve by having that man follow her?"

What did he think to achieve? He wanted to ensure her safety. Granted, Percival wasn't the best man for the job, but he trusted the fellow explicitly. But how could he explain it to her? He had enough trouble trying to do so with Winifred, and even then she hit him with her parasol. His arm still ached from her attack.

He released a sardonic chuckle and stood as he emptied the last of his brandy and moved over to refill it. As he poured himself a cup he could feel her gaze on him, assessing him. Turning he leant back on the table and casually sipped his drink, judging Lady Neely's disposition. What did she expect him to say ... if anything at all?

"Well, I can clearly see the ... honorable intentions you had," she said finally. "But you must see that having a man stalk her aggravated the situation. She is a strong woman that doesn't like to be ... frightened so."

Ransom rolled his eyes. He knew this! It was needless to discuss something so irrelevant. The question now was who shot at Winifred. What perhaps might be misconstrued as a perverted game had become deadly. Someone wanted her dead. The desperation was seen in the fact that he had attempted to kill her in broad daylight.

He had followed the trajectory of the bullet and searched the general area of where the shot had come from, but his search had come up empty. The fact that no one saw anything or questioned the gunfire boggled his mind.

"He'll..."--he paused, his throat throbbing with the effort--"kill her."

Lady Neely tapped her chin in contemplation. "Perhaps, but as yet he's been unsuccessful."

*But for how long?* Granted he had been at the right place at the right time whenever her life was threatened, but what if he wasn't there next time? The thought set an uneasiness churning in him, and he gripped the side of the table for support.

"My my, you're looking a bit green around the gills. Is everything all right?"

Ransom swallowed hard and nodded.

She smoothed her hands along the arm of the chair, stood, and sashayed over to him. Her hand touched his chest, and she leaned into him, her body so close that he stilled, bemused by her behavior.

Her eyes twinkled with inner knowledge, her eyelids lowered as her lips tilted in a languorous line. "Perhaps it's time you rethink your strategy."

She pulled back slowly and sauntered from the room and paused at the threshold, her hand on the doorframe as she looked back at him over her shoulder. A sultry laugh tinkled through the room. "Come now, don't look like that. No one can compete with a man in love--now can they?"

With that she whispered from the room, leaving Ransom with his thoughts. Swallowing his drink he strolled over to the fireplace and rested his forearm against the mantle as he stared into the flames. The heat of the fire burned his eyes, but he refused to look away. This problem had taken a drastic turn, and whether Winifred wanted to admit it or not, she was in terrible danger. He would do anything in his power to protect her.

\* \* \* \*

Lady Witherspoon's house party contained the most scandalous members of the *ton*. Indeed, it was a wonder why people even attended, but Winifred suspected that many came for the chance to view a scandal unfold before them. Standing among the women that awaited their turn around the dance floor, she folded her arms around her chest and tapped her foot to the beat of the music.

After a delectable supper that Lady Witherspoon supplied, they all retired to the assembly room for entertainment and a night of dancing. Her wandering gaze observed several women and men previously involved in scandal, each having re-emerged into society for a night of fun.

"My, my, this is going to prove interesting. Lady Warrick and Lord Falt are here," Lady Neely said from behind her.

Winifred tilted her head and glanced back at Elizabeth, a brow raised in reluctant interest. Even she was unable to totally resist the relish for scandal. Everyone knew of Lady Warrick's fall from grace that had forced her brother, Lord Carlyle, into a duel with Lord Falt. Indeed, had it not been for her marriage to Lord Warrick, she would have been left alone to her ruin.

"I'm surprised Lady Warrick would dream of attending, knowing that Lady Witherspoon would surely invite him," Winifred whispered.

Lady Neely chuckled. "No one says no to Lady Witherspoon."

She had to agree with her on that point. She herself had a choice of whether to attend or not. Her very invitation guaranteed Lord Leahaven's attendance, and though she knew this, she still found herself reluctant to decline.

"So tell me, have you seen Lord Leahaven as yet?" Elizabeth asked with a mischievous gleam in her eye.

Winifred stiffened. "No I have not," she said with icy disdain.

"Hm, pity. I do believe that is what people are wishing for after the prime entertainment you gave them the last time you were in a ballroom together."

Winifred drew in a calming breath. "Must you mention such a thing? Besides, he certainly deserved what he got and more."

Lady Neely smiled. "Indeed, he did. I hardly blame you for taking such action.

However, I do believe you've been having quite a bit of ... *contact* with him of late."

A wave of heat washed over her face. "Not willingly, I assure you. And I would appreciate it if you would be so kind as to not to mention that fool again."

Lady Neely chuckled and tilted her head. Her gaze flicked past her and her lips pursed in repressed mirth. "Oh my, speak of the Devil."

Winifred glanced over the crowd and found herself in Ransom's sights. His intense regard stirred embers within her that she stifled with cruel precision. Despite her best efforts she, found herself recalling his heated stare and warm body over hers the previous day. Thoughts of attacks and mortal danger disappeared in the face of another threat--Ransom.

With a brittle smile, she snapped her fan open and fanned herself with vigor, her message clear as she eyed him with disdain. From across the ballroom she could see a glimmer of amusement enter his eye, and her ire rose a notch--followed by dismay as he began to approach.

She held her ground, determined not to disgrace herself. The music wound down and the people that crossed the ballroom floor in search of their next partners engulfed him. She waited in tense anticipation as the gathering parted enough, and he strode through. His gaze burnt into her and a frizzle of heat washed through her.

He stopped before her. Before she could open her mouth to hand him a biting retort, his hand latched on hers. With a devilish gleam in his eye, he dragged her onto the dance floor. Winifred jerked on her hand, her gasp of dismay lost in the crowd as he whirled her around and steadied her with his other hand. His fingers squeezed her waist, and she glared up at him, her lips pursed in repressed mortification.

Her gaze captured the interested stares of the matrons that tittered with delight at the stirrings of another scandal. They expected a conflict, and though she dearly wanted to remove herself from the situation, she found herself somewhat reluctant. With an icy glare, she turned her attention back to Leahaven, who regarded her with an amused upturned brow.

"You must love to humiliate me," she accused as she curtsied.

His chin tilted a fraction as through bemused by her statement. The music started up again, and she found herself drawn into his arms as the waltz began. Her hands automatically held position, and her eyes widened in mortification.

The waltz! The patrons at Almack's had yet to accept such a scandalous dance, and despite Baron Neuman's attempt to bring it into society, it was still frowned upon. It was little wonder why Lady Witherspoon organized it, as young debutantes tittered delightfully at the interaction and the matrons reddened in dismay.

Ransom's fingers wrapped around her waist as he pulled her close. Her thoughts came to an immediate halt, and she glared up at his twinkling, twilight depths. Indeed, it would appear that he found this whole thing quite amusing.

"You're disgraceful."

His smile grew at her words, and she scowled all the more. They twirled around the floor at a languorous pace. His warm hand penetrated her dress and touched her skin, and a shiver of long dormant desire ran through her, followed by hot annoyance that warmed her face.

"How dare you come here and drag me onto the floor! As though I would want to spend time with you!" She snorted at the notion. "I would rather ... kiss a toad than you."



He tilted his head, seemingly unmoved by her scornful tone.

Her lips twisted in annoyance at his lack of reaction. The fire of indignation waned against the cold force of his nonchalance. "Have you nothing to say?"

"No."

No? That's all he had to say? With an incensed sneer, she followed his lead as her mind scrambled for something that would give her satisfaction. A proper set-down seemed appropriate enough, yet she found herself both reluctant and unable to form a fitting retort.

She found herself recalling the event in Hyde Park the previous day and weighed up his unjust actions and his attempt to save her life. Still, she had no proof that he had not hired some person to shoot at her.

They danced in silence for a moment, his intense gaze burning into her as he drew her in more than what was considered appropriate. His legs brushed against her skirt as he moved. She gasped at the contact, dismayed that her body betrayed her and thrilled with delight. Pushing back, she scowled at his audacity and stifled the warmth that permeated her body with cold reality.

"So tell me, my lord, do you still remain in contact with the other two fellows that make up the Devil's Trio?"

His eyes darkened at her words, his lips set in a firm line to show that she had clearly touched on a sore subject. She smirked at his discontent, and despite the warning bells in her head, she persisted.

"I do wonder though, since the war you fellows haven't made the gossip mill. It's quite interesting since you were quite often mentioned and seemed to relish such exposure. Is that perhaps the reason you pursue me? An attempt to draw me into another scandal?"

She eyed him for a moment, his indigo depths swirled with emotions she had never seen in his eyes before. Rage. Rage at her ... or at himself? She shivered with apprehension.

His brows lowered over his eyes. His fingers bit into her waist, though he hardly seemed aware of his actions.

"Ow, you're hurting me."

He blinked as though snapping out of a daze, and his fingers eased from her waist. "I apologize."

His fingers caressed her waist as though to ease her pain, yet she had a suspicion it was an action to ease his pain. What did this man hide? She had never known him in the past to be so secretive.

"Why did you have that man follow me?" she asked.

A muscle tensed in his jaw, yet he remained silent. The frustration in his eyes gave her pause.

Did he find her constant lack of trust in him wearisome? She scrutinized every line of his face as though the answer to her query was written there. Despite her reservations toward him, she found herself questioning everything she knew about him. Ever so quiet, he remained a mystery to her.

Her lips pursed at her hesitation and cursed her weak heart. He didn't deserve her trust and she was a fool to fall for his trick in Hyde Park. Yes, how could a man that had no scruples suddenly develop them?

"You're ... in ... danger," he whispered.

Winifred's eyes widened at his words. Did he think she was daft? The true question was whether he was behind all this. "I know very well how much danger I am in," she retorted.

"You need ... protection."

"From you perhaps." She eyed him with disdain.

"Not me."

She snorted at his denial. He always took his time to answer her. "You are a terrible liar, my lord. How could you think that I would fall for your little game? I'm far more wiser now, and I find your efforts to endear yourself to me quite pathetic."

With that, she pulled out of his grasp and strode from the assembly room, weaving through the twirling guests.

Lady Neely edged along the room and met her at the entrance of the hall, her eyes wide with concern. "Whatever is amiss?"

Winifred glanced over her shoulder at Ransom to find him regarding her with a cold determined gleam in his eye that sent a shiver through her. What had she done?

"Nothing at all," she denied, striding into the dark hallway.

"So, are you still in love with him?"

Winifred gasped at the question, a tingling sensation running over her like needles as she whirled on Elizabeth. "I most certainly am not!"

An eyebrow rose in the dim light. "My dear, don't be so sensitive. It was merely a question. Had I thought it would bother you so, I would never have considered broaching the subject. *Although*, I do believe I spoke to him last night. My dear, you are quite the wanton."

"What are you talking about?" she whispered harshly.

Lady Neely lifted one casual shoulder, her eyes wide with the pretence of innocence. "Well, you weren't so forth coming with your story, so I had to find out somehow."

"You associate with that scoundrel? Despite all that he has done?" She held out her hands in implication, her gaze shot about her in a vague search. "Why are all my friends abandoning me on this?"

Lady Neely remained silent for a moment. "I'm not abandoning you. It's just that it's been five years."

Painful tears bit at the back of her throat, but Winifred stifled them. "How dare you belittle the pain I suffered." Her throat ached from the effort of keeping the tremor from her voice.

"I'm not belittling it. It's just that--don't you think it's time to let the past go?"

Winifred knocked Elizabeth's hand away. "No, I don't. That man ruined me," she said pointing to the assembly room beyond. "He destroyed my heart."

"I know," she intoned sympathetically.

"No, you obviously don't. You think it a lark that he came back into my life, that he assaults me in the Gardens and constantly humiliates me."

Lady Neely shrugged. "What can I say? I believe everyone needs a chance at redemption," she said sagely.

"Well, he won't be getting any from me." With that she whirled from her friend and stormed from the house.

It was dark outside, and the streets were lit by lanterns that cast their soft light along the wet cobblestone road. Hugging herself, she sniffled at the tears that clogged the back of her throat with an odd mixture of frustration, despair and confusion that gave her misery strength.

Rubbing at her eye with her gloved hand, the insistent tears that pierced her control wet the fabric. Her chest opened up to a wave of pain that crashed over her, and she released another silent sob.

She attempted to steel herself with anger, but this time the sputtering flame of her fury failed to sway the stream of misery that drowned out her indignation. Swallowing hard, she shuffled over to a lamppost, stood under its light, and thought about her actions.

Had she not been so quick to anger, perhaps she could have procured the use of another's carriage to assist her home. She refused to use Lady Neely's and remained outside out of pure stubbornness. Now she would have to hire a hackney in order to go home.

The sound of an approaching horse drew her attention, and she turned toward the sound. Perfect. She peered into the darkness, hoping for the approaching carriage to be a hackney.

A movement from behind caught her off guard, and she reacted too late, her high-pitched cry cut off by a handkerchief that covered her mouth. The acrid stench of chloroform burned her nostrils as her eyes widened in comprehension.

Screaming in terror, she struggled against her attacker's strong arms, twisting and turning against his hold. She kicked backward in an attempt to injure him, but she failed to make contact. Suffocating on the heavy scent, she gagged at it, her fingers raking at the hand that held the cloth in place. Tears of dread trailed down her cheeks as she twisted in his hold, an ironic thought drifting on the drug induced haze that she stood outside a townhouse meeting her demise, while others frolicked inside unaware of her struggles.

Her fingers lost their dexterity as her limbs began to feel leaden and fell uselessly by her side, her sluggish mind unable to do much but scream out protest as the rest of her body fell victim to the chloroform. The world spun as a black haze crept up on her vision.

The cloth was removed and she inhaled the stagnant London air, but it was too late. Her body was languorous and incapable of helping her. Her last thoughts fell on Ransom, as her head lolled back onto her attacker's shoulder. He was right. She was in danger, and now she was about to die.

## Chapter Fifteen

Winifred woke to a slow rocking, the musky scent of leather, and stale air. Images of her last moments crashed into her. She wasn't dead. Measuring her breathing, her heart raced in her ears as she tried to ascertain where she was.

A rumbling sound of wheels turning thundered near her ear, and she judged by the softness on her back that she lay on a carriage seat. Wood creaked in time with the motion. The muffled pounding of horses' hoofs told her they were traveling in relative speed.

Where was he taking her? Cold fear ran icy fingers along her skin, and she swallowed slowly, lest her attacker realize she was awake. Her mouth was dry, her tongue hairy from the horrible chloroform she had inhaled earlier, and she found it difficult to stay the nausea that rose up from the constant sway of the carriage.

Her sluggish mind began to formulate a plan. Her only chance for survival was to somehow surprise her captor and flee the coach. She listened intently to the sounds within the cabinet. Her captor's breathing was slow and measured, but it hardly indicated to her whether he slept or not.

The carriage lurched as it hit a pothole. A wave of nausea roiled through her, and she stifled the groan that came to her lips. Across from her, her attacker shifted in his seat. Her heart thumped against her chest and pattered in a panicked state. Despite her best efforts, she gasped for air, her attempt to appear unconscious lost under the force of her queasiness.

She had to do it. Now! Clenching her teeth she let out a determined grunt and rolled onto the floor. Her hands hit the ground as her eyes snapped open and lurched for the door.

A muffled sound came from her captor as she twisted the handle and jerked it open. She flung herself out of the carriage and hit the moist earth with an *umph*.

Pain seared along her side as she rolled and slid against the muddy embankment. Catching her breath, she pushed to her feet, ignoring the dull throb in her ankle as she ran in the opposite direction.

She could hear muffled curses, and she glanced back at the carriage. It began to slow, and she renewed her efforts to outrun them. Trees lined the muddy road, and the soft light of the silver moon cast its eerie glow along the path. The branches waved in the chilly breeze like ghostly revelers at her demise.

Gasping for air, she ran with all her might, pausing only to hike the skirt that encumbered her strides. Behind her the carriage stopped, and she knew within moments her captor would be after her.

Her lungs burned from the effort, and tears of terror pierced the back of her eyes. Ahead of her the vast landscape offered no sanctuary, and she knew with cold despair that her run for freedom was futile.

"Help me!" Her feet pounded into the dirt, her breath wheezing from her.  
"Help!"

Behind her pounding feet drew her attention, and she sobbed, her arms pumping hard to gain speed. The impact from behind caught her, and she hit the ground hard, stars flashing before her eyes as her chin jarred against the muddy ground.

Her attacker rolled her over, and she held out her hands protectively. "Please," she sobbed. "Please, don't hurt me."

He wrapped his fingers around her wrists and brought them together over her head. His shadowy form leaned forward, and she screamed. His hand shot up and covered her mouth, and she writhed beneath him in an attempt to break free.

A splinter of silver light slashed across his profile, and Winifred drew in a harsh, muffled sound at what she saw. The dark depths of his eyes and raven hair were very familiar. A wave of fury raged through her. Lord Leahaven.

She ceased her struggles. Her breath came in harsh pants as he eased his hand from her mouth. "You bastar--!"

His hand dropped over her mouth once more. "Be calm," he whispered.

He wanted her to be calm? He had kidnapped her! She shook with rage and indignation, her eyes narrowed to slits as she glared at him. He sighed in resignation, lifted his hand from her mouth, and eased off her.

In an instant Winifred scrambled to her feet and glared at him. Her chest rose and fell in erratic puffs. "You kidnapped me?" she asked incredulously.

His jaw tensed as he nodded.

Winifred slapped him. The crack of sound echoed in the silence, and she clenched her fingers against the sting in her palm. "I was right. You concocted all this. I don't know what you think to achieve with this wild plan, but you won't get anything from me."

"No."

"No what? If you think to hold me for ransom or some other fool plan, I shall have you clapped in chains before you know it."

He remained a solid wall of silence, his hands clenched at his side.

"Don't for one second think I won't do it," she warned. "Your actions are criminal."

He stared at her for a moment, his arms crossed over his chest, unmoved by her tirade.

"I demand you take me home," she said.

Without a word he turned on his heel and strode back to the carriage. She stared at his receding back for a moment. Her common sense demanded her hesitation, yet her fear of the encroaching darkness that seemed to close up on her demanded she follow.

Scurrying after him, she refused his assistance and hiked her skirt to mount the carriage. Sliding along the smooth seat, she edged against the side of the cabin and crossed her arms over her chest. He entered the cabin in silence. His soft gaze pierced her in the dim light of the compartment, and she harrumphed in return.

At least now he was seeing reason. Her relief was short-lived. She stared out the window and found that the carriage still continued to head north, away from London. The carriage lurched as the horses kicked up speed, and she quickly realized that he was not taking her home.

She turned her regard to Ransom, who sat in the shadows, his legs resting on the seat across from him, his gaze unfathomable. "I thought we agreed you were taking me

back to London,” she said.

“No.”

“No? No! You let me out of this carriage now. I’m sick of your silly games.”

She stood as much as she could in the carriage in an attempt to reach for the door, but he was quick to react. In a flash of movement he was out of his seat, his hand latched onto hers and pulled her back into the seat beside him.

Winifred gasped at the sudden movement, and her head hit the wall of the carriage. He reached around his neck and began to jerk his cravat free. Her eyes widened with comprehension.

In a fit of fury and desperation she slapped at him, her free hand hitting the side of his face, his shoulder and his arms, anywhere she could reach while she attempted to twist her wrist free.

In the dimness his eyes flared with annoyance as he grasped her attacking hand and pulled it into the other hand holding her still. With both hands captive, he resumed untying his cravat and wrapped it around one wrist before jerking hard and throwing her over his lap.

“Wha--what are you doing?” she cried.

She couldn’t see a thing, and she twisted in an attempt to break free. He pulled her other arm behind her back and quickly tied her wrists together, incapacitating her.

“Let me go!” She bucked against his lap. Her feet hit the carriage wall in order to gain leverage, but it was to no avail. She was helpless.

Gasping at the exertion, she swallowed hard and ceased her struggles. Her chin rested in defeat against his thigh. “Are you happy now?” she sneered. “Does this make you feel like more of a man?”

Beyond the door and carriage floor, she couldn’t see much but she could certainly feel his reaction as his legs tensed beneath her chin. “No,” he said.

No? He’d been saying that a lot recently, and it began to irk her. Had he nothing better to say? “Let me up now. I can hardly escape now that you’ve tied me up.”

“No.”

“No!” She struggled against him while his hand pressed into her back, stilling her. “Let me up, you scoundrel!”

“Relax.”

“You kidnapped me! I will absolutely not relax!”

“Don’t ... make me ... hurt you,” he said, struggling to hold her down.

She gasped at his words, everything stilling in her. “You wouldn’t.”

He remained silent at her words, and she was left to ponder the seriousness of her situation. Her mother would notice that she was missing and alert the proper authorities. She smirked at the thought. Ransom would get what was coming to him. His comeuppance.

Ransom touched the tender skin along his cheek and sighed. Truly he had deserved the slap, yet he could think of no other way to make her see to reason. A man shot at her, and she was still determined to remain in London. Left with no other choice, he resorted to the worst form of desperation possible.

He’d kidnapped her. Although he had purchased the chloroform, he found himself reluctant to use it and tried to appeal to her commonsense. Yet she had remained blind to the danger she was in. Whether out of stubbornness or bitterness toward him he

didn't know. Either way, she left him with no choice.

She shifted on his lap, her head turned toward the opposite wall. "Where are you taking me?"

"Home."

"To my estate?" The hopeful pitch in her voice pierced him.

"No." They were headed back to his estate where he could ensure her safety until he figured out who was after her.

"No! My mother will know I'm missing, you know. You won't get away with this."

Ransom's brows lowered at her words. Indeed, he hadn't considered all the repercussions. Her mother's reaction offered him another problem with the poorly thought out plan.

"You may as well return me now," Winifred said rather smugly.

Ransom's lips tilted in a wry smile. That was the last thing he intended to do, and this entire problem required was a bit of forethought. He quickly ran over a few ideas, then finally settled on the most feasible answer and perhaps the most difficult to achieve. He'd have to write a letter.

"Well?" she asked in a sharp tone. "You're going to take me back to London, aren't you?"

"No."

Winifred growled in frustration. "You are the most obstinately annoying man I've had the misfortune to meet."

Ransom chuckled, and she responded with a bite to his thigh. Choking off his laughter, his knee jerked up at the pain. Grasping her by the shoulders, he pulled her up onto her knees. Her smug expression tickled a nerve, and he scowled.

He rubbed at the tender area and leaned back, watching her carefully as she struggled to pull her feet out from underneath her. Her locks tumbled over her features from her destroyed coiffure.

Grunting with effort, she kicked one leg out, then sighed as she sat. Flicking her hair back, she pierced him with a scathing stare. "I don't know what you think to achieve from this little scheme of yours, but I won't let you get away with it."

Ransom smiled and merely perused her heated features with relish. Her cheeks darkened all the more against her fair skin, and she looked like a goddess. Her chest heaved from the exertion of her previous struggles. The wet muddy fabric of her bodice revealed the turgid nipples beneath.

The fire in her eyes melted into uncertainty, and her gaze flittered across the cabin, unable to meet his. "Stop looking at me like that," she cried, her voice ringing with uncertainty.

Ransom blinked. "What?"

She peered at him for a brief moment before glancing away again, her body flush against the carriage wall as though she were a deer caught by the attention of a predator. "What? You're looking at me like ... like you want to devour me."

He hadn't been aware he'd been staring at her in any such way. Smiling, he crossed his arms over his chest. Her gasp and sudden jerk made him chuckle. It was clear to him that it was a more a fear of herself than of him. "Afraid?"

"Afraid? Of you? Don't be ridiculous," she huffed.

He cleared his throat, readying himself for another relatively difficult sentence. "I think ... you are."

"I most certainly am not! If you think for one moment that I would fall victim to your charms you can think again."

With the gauntlet laid, Ransom pushed up in his seat. His gaze raked her body in a deliberate attempt to throw her. It worked like a charm. Her eyes widened with apprehension as he eased across the surface of the seat.

"What are you doing? Stay where you are."

Ignoring her, he slid one arm across the top of the seat. Her gaze snapped to it, then back at him. Her eyes flickered with emotion as she caught her lower lip between her teeth, and he knew her intention before she reacted. Her foot shot up in an attempt to injure him, but he was ready and caught it with an easy hand.

With a devilish smile, he circled her ankle with his fingers and tugged until she was pulled flat onto the seat. Looming over her with one hand above her shoulder and the other holding her knee, he drank in her profile, her flashing eyes and full lips. Beautiful.

He leaned forward. The scent of fresh earth mingled with cinnamon and woman intoxicated him. Her breath faltered as he drew close. His lids lowered, drawn in by her siren's call, and he brushed his lips ever so softly over hers. The fire of that simple touch was almost his undoing as he swept over her lips again, his body tense with desire.

Their breath mingled together, and his tongue slid gently over the surface of her lips. She drew breath in a tremulous gasp. He took her bottom lip in his and sucked, his nerve endings flaring as passion bloomed in the pit of his stomach.

He pulled back. Her heavy-lidded gaze told him she had fallen victim to his charm, but as yet he wasn't ready to accept his victory. With a whisper of her name, he took her mouth in a fervent kiss. His tongue danced with hers, that answered his in ardor. He tasted the sweet desire that had been lit years ago and reveled in its re-birth.

He wanted to continue. He wanted to touch her as he had dreamed for many years and he found himself unable to resist. The haze of desire killed all morality as he eased his hand up her thigh, taking with it her skirt.

His fingertips glided along the soft skin of her inner thigh and searched for the slit that would allow him entrance into heaven. He eased past the fabric and touched her femininity. Her gasp caught in his mouth as he paid homage to her with gentle attention. He tickled her with an expert hand and readied her for further pleasure; her mystified moans of delight urged him forward.

He had wanted this for years. The sweet nectar of her body seduced him, and he kissed her with fervor. His tongue mimicked the finger that plunged into her.

She moaned as he eased her along the path to heaven with slow, teasing strokes in and out of her. He groaned at the intense satisfaction mingled with frustrated passion as he increased the pace, and she ripped her mouth from his and arched her back in abandon.

She looked like Aphrodite, her hair splayed out on the seat. Her eyes glimmered with desire as he worked her, and her knee came up and clasped onto his hip, urging him to continue.

"Oh ... oh, Ransom!" Her head fell back as she cried out her release. Her feminine walls contracted over his finger and drew him into the warm embrace of sweet satisfaction.



He eased from her and pushed back to drink in the portrait of complete repletion. He found himself liking what he saw. She turned her head and looked at him, and he brushed his lips once more over hers. Their breaths mingled.

“I win,” he whispered against her lips.

## Chapter Sixteen

Winifred sat in the carriage and glowered at the passing landscape. It was mid-morning now, and she knew that Ransom had spent the better part of the last few hours staring at her. His intense regard sent spirals of delight mingled with shame and indignation through her.

She absolutely refused to look at him. Her shame prevented her from doing so. Last night he had shown her exquisite pleasure. She had succumbed to him so easily that she burnt with humiliation. The minute his lips touched hers, she had found herself incapable of thought. All logic abandoned her, and she allowed him to do things to her body that she had never dreamed possible. Even now, her body ached with wanting, and she despised that part of her. That primal part of her that she had never been able to fully exorcise from herself.

She supposed she should be at least thankful that he had untied her, but she wasn't. Nothing in life had gone her way since his arrival, and she resented him for showing her how much she still wanted him.

Her stomach contracted painfully, and she grimaced at the reminder that she hadn't had anything to eat. Releasing an indignant huff, she crossed her arms and scowled all the more. He had offered her food earlier this morning but she refused and now she suffered the consequences of her stubbornness.

The landscape opened up to a vast field with evenly lined trees along the side of road. She chanced a glance at Ransom and noticed for once his gaze wasn't on her but cast out the window.

Light splintered across his profile, and Winifred's traitorous heart fluttered at the sight. Raven locks fell over his features in seductive disarray. His unshaven jaw increased his devil-may-care appearance, but his eyes compelled her. The twilight depths glittered in the light, lightening to a dark turquoise.

As though sensing her regard, he turned his head. His gaze captured her, and she flared with emotion. Winifred stilled in her seat as warmth rode up her cheeks. A coil of heat settled in the pit of her stomach, and against her will her attention fixated on his lips. His luscious, sinful lips.

The carriage lurched and she gasped, jolted out of her fascination. She clasped the leathered cushion to keep her seat. Thankful for the interruption, she turned her attention out the window and gaped at the ancient manor that greeted her. The honey stone walls rose up into large parapets graced by gargoyles that stared down at them in silent glee. The carriage pulled to halt before the entrance, the arched entranceway and intricate masonry work leaving her in awe.

The large windows glinted in the sunlight, and she squinted to get a better view of the carved parapets and stylish carvings in the very brickwork. Indeed, this Elizabethan home must require a vast fortune to simply maintain.

A cold realization jolted through her, followed by heated fury. Everything came together so easily, and she whirled on Ransom, her lips curled in contempt. "Very well,

you win. How much do you want?"

Dark eyebrows rose in surprise, and Winifred had to applaud his acting ability.

"Oh, come now," she said. "It's clear to me that with a manor like this you would need a fortune to uphold it. Let's dispense with pretenses. I'll give you some money and you can return me to London."

He remained silent, his brows lowered as he contemplated her. Winifred leaned back in her seat and smiled with smug satisfaction. It was clear to her that she had all the bargaining power now since she had the money he needed.

"Not ... interested."

Winifred jerked up at his words. Not interested? "What?"

"Don't need it," he said slowly, as though the words pained him. Clearly this man's pride was in the way.

"Come now, my lord. Everyone knows that you are on the ropes."

He smiled at her words. His eyes twinkled with silent mirth, and for a moment Winifred felt she had missed some type of amusing antidote. It appeared to her that Ransom was not about to surrender his pride as yet or the upper-hand.

With a growl of frustration, she crossed her arms. Her mood turned sullen, and she cast him a dark scowl, to which he responded with a slow wink. She drew in a sharp breath to hand him a heavy set-down, but the door to the cabin opened, forestalling her.

The footman held his hand out, and Winifred cast Ransom another menacing stare, then alighted from the carriage. A plan was formulating in her head, and she needed empathy from the servants. Thanking the footman with a soft, endearing tone, she batted her eyelids at him. His pale, freckled face darkened under her attention.

Inwardly she wanted to rub her hands together with glee. She now had a champion for her cause, and she determined to use him to her best advantage.

"Tell me, what is your name?"

The red-head teenager sputtered at her disregard for etiquette. It was clear to her he was unused to anyone of class speaking to him. "George, m'lady."

She beamed at him and his blush darkened. "It's nice to meet you, George."

From behind her Ransom gripped her elbow and whirled her toward him. His eyes narrowed to slits, and Winifred feared he'd seen through her plot. With false bravado she tilted her chin and glared back at him, daring him. His attention shifted to the boy that still remained standing where he was.

"Go." At Ransom's uttered command George scurried off and left her alone to fight her own battle. "Don't. Do it."

Winifred blinked and stared at him with wide-eyed innocence. "Don't do what?"

His fingers tightened over her elbow and bit into her skin, but she refused to show him any sign of her pain as she clenched her teeth together. Ransom swallowed hard, frustration etched on his features as he cleared his throat. "No one ... will. Help you."

Winifred's heart sank at his words. He had guessed her plan. Damn him! "What did you expect me to do?" she asked sarcastically. "I'm not going to allow you to get away with this."

Ignoring her, he turned and dragged her toward the manor. The door opened before they reached the porch. A portly butler of middle-age stared down at them--a difficult task since he was her height. "Good day, my lord," he greeted.

Ransom nodded his head in acknowledgement and continued along the expansive

hall. The sound of their footsteps echoed in the cavernous space. Tapestries lined the walls, their clean scent and bright colors telling her that he maintained a vast number of servants to see to the property.

The hall itself was breathtaking with its large columns and strapped ceilings. The fine art and decorations on display were a clear indication that the hall was created to purely impress. They mounted the steps to the second level, and she stared the statues and art-pieces that decorated the gallery they traversed with growing apprehension.

This estate didn't portray a man on a monkey's allowance. It revealed a gentleman of considerable wealth and means, and she had a strong--if sick--feeling that Ransom indeed had no use for her money.

Their journey came to an end in a large bedroom. The soft cream and gold walls, matching settee and large bed were elegant and sophisticated. A master bedroom. She glanced at Ransom, who released her and stepped back, allowing her space to move. She surveyed the room with a judicial eye. Her attention shifted to the adjoining door that sent a spark of alarm through her.

"Am I to sleep here?"

He nodded.

"And where are you sleeping?"

He stared at her for a long moment before he nudged his head toward the adjoining door. A heated wave of indignation washed over her at the implications of their sleeping quarters.

"Don't you dare think I'll allow you near me. If you think to--to debauch me will force me into compliance, you can think again. I should have expected no better from a scoundrel such as you."

His lips pursed in a thin line of annoyance, and without a word he turned and left the room, closing the door behind him. The sound of a key grating in the lock pierced her with growing horror.

She rushed to the door and jerked onto the handle, rattling it against the futility of the situation. She pressed her ear against the wood. The sound of his receding footsteps sent a spiral of indignant fury through her.

She hit the door in her anger. "Let me out, you cur!"

The footsteps continued on, not missing a beat. Turning, she hurried over to the adjoining door and rattled the handle. Locked. She kicked the door and immediately regretted her action. The sting of her toes traveled up her foot, and she hobbled toward the bed, mumbling all the vile things she wished upon Ransom. He had locked her in. She was well and truly a prisoner.

\* \* \* \*

Winifred woke to the sound of someone bustling in her room and stiffened. Cracking an eye open, she observed a middle-aged maid attending to the room. The amber hues of dusk filtered in and cast long shadows across the floor. Her attention shifted to the entranceway, and she drew in a soft relieved breath at the door that stood ajar.

Winifred eyed the maid, who was preoccupied with straightening the garderobe. Her breath caught in the back of her throat as she eased off the bed with slow careful movements, her slippered toe gently touched the floor. Swallowing against her raging heartbeat, she tensed and readied herself.

With a sudden surge of energy, Winifred flung herself from the bed with a short war cry and ran for the door. Ignoring the servant's shriek of surprise, she threw the door open and sprinted down the hall.

Behind her the cries of dismay from the woman echoed across the gallery, and Winifred increased her efforts to get out of the manor. Scurrying down the stairs, the servant's continued cries muffled by the distance, she hit the hall in a full run.

The sound of heavy footfalls echoed in the cavernous space, and she glanced over her shoulder to find Ransom pursuing her. Gasping at the pain that blossomed in her lungs, she turned the corner and fumbled for the handle of the front door. With a sob of frustration, she managed to ease the door open before it was slammed shut in her face.

She whirled around and found herself imprisoned by a wall of muscle and fury. His eyes glittered with retribution, his lips turned down in a severe line. Coldness gripped her heart as her stomach whirled with fear. What was he going to do to her?

Without another word he gripped her elbow and dragged her along the hall, ignoring her struggles and protestations. Her heart leapt in her throat as he drew her into a room and slammed the door behind them, leaving her very much alone with him.

"Wha ... what are you going to do?" she asked tremulously.

Standing in the middle of a dark room lit only by the fireplace, his dark eyes gleamed like the Devil himself. "Nothing."

He gripped her elbow tighter, and she hissed in pain before he released it and she stumbled back. Claspings her trembling fingers in her muddled skirt, she swallowed at the lump of fear in her throat. Her short-lived bravado failed under his looming form and hard set features that promised retribution for his troubles.

She stepped back from him, but he followed. Winifred recoiled, wishing for as much distance from him as possible. She continued to shuffle backward until the back of her foot hit a chair, and she tumbled back with a cry of shock into the great leather armchair.

Allowed not a moment of space, his arms fell on either side of her as his body tilted forward. She pressed back against the seat in an attempt to find safety in what little space she could put between them. His hot breath touched her cheek, and she shivered. In fear or something deeper, she didn't want to acknowledge--or refused to decipher.

"Don't. Do. That. Again," he rasped.

Winifred licked her lips, and his attention shifted to her mouth. Her stomach fluttered. His eyes softened for a moment, and she stilled, half of her wanting what his gaze promised while the other half balked at it.

The lines on his face stiffened. "You've nothing to ... fear."

"You're holding me hostage," she whispered breathlessly.

He grinned. "Guest."

"You don't tie up guests." The minute she uttered those words she regretted them. The pool of desire that gathered in the pit of her stomach surged to life.

She drew in short puffs of air to gain control, yet she could see that Ransom's thoughts were on the same line as hers. His smile faded; the heated promise in his eyes compelled her. As though sensing her supplication, he leaned forward, his lips held just a fraction from hers, teasing her. Compelling her.

When his lips did touch hers, she immediately opened hers. Her eyes slid shut as liquid lightening shot through her. He dazzled her with his expertise, his tongue

skimming along hers in slow erotic slides. She purred in delight. She answered his seductive call and danced with him, her own ardent response eliciting a groan from him that sent a spiral of satisfaction through her.

His hand cupped her breast and rubbed the aching tip to throbbing awareness. A hum of pleasure emanated from the depths of her chest. On their own accord her arms wrapped around his neck as she arched her back to allow him better access.

His warm palm slipped into her bodice and cupped her. His thumb and forefinger gently pinched her as sweet agony roiled from that point and washed through her. She wanted more ... wanted him. She tipped her head back as he slid his hot lips along her neck and kissed her collarbone, edging lower....

The sounds of a throat clearing brought reality crashing about them, and Winifred could've sobbed from the injustice of it as hot embarrassment warmed her cheeks. Ransom pulled back from her and glanced over his shoulder.

"Leave us," he growled.

Although she was unable to see who stood behind him, she could certainly hear her. "You asked for me, my lord."

With a frustrated sigh he pulled back. The tepid air cooled her ardor and left her bereft and confused. Shrinking in her seat, she crossed her arms over her chest to still the hard ache there and stared at the woman that only moments before she was outrunning.

Ransom silently cursed the interruption but arranged his features into calm disinterest. He had not asked for Agnes, but it was clear to him that his old governess was determined to protect Winifred's ... purity. Damn her.

His body throbbed with wanting and frustration that left him in an ill mood with no release, verbal or physical. Inclining his head a fraction, he stepped aside from in front of Winifred and slipped into the seat across from her.

Winifred's wide-eyed gaze pierced him with shame. He knew, had it not been for the interruption, he would have found some way to lay her out on the floor and make her his. Last night had been a mistake. Every breath he took ached with longing. Tasting the passion she hid beneath a façade of anger had been his undoing, and he wanted her more now than he ever had before.

Agnes shuffled over. Her knowing gaze stabbed at him with censure, and he glowered at the shame that rolled through him.

"I have a meal and a bath being prepared for the young lady, my lord. I trust she'll be hungry."

Ransom cringed at her words, but inclined his head in acquiescence. He chanced a look at Winifred to find her licking her lips. A hungry gleam entered her eyes, and he was washed over with guilt. He'd forgotten that she had nothing to eat all day, which only proved how ill-equipped he was to handle the situation.

"Come, my lady. Let's get you cleaned up."

Winifred shot him a hesitant stare before she stood and shuffled from the room, taking with her all the warmth.

He leaned back in his seat and rubbed a hand over his face. What was he thinking? Over the last couple of hours since his return home, he found himself questioning the solidity of his plan. He had already sent a messenger off with a quick note to Lady Neely to explain what he had done and ask her to come up with a feasible lie to carry over the Season and not mar Winifred's name.

Despite his good intentions, it still remained a cruel course of action, and he was left with no way to rectify the situation but to make Winifred as comfortable as possible. The silence in the room deafened him and made him feel closed in. He needed fresh air.

Striding from the house, he made his way to the stable and saddled and lead out his horse. He cast a glance up at Winifred's window and sighed. Mounting the thoroughbred in one smooth motion, he urged it into a gallop in an effort to outrun his conscience.

\* \* \* \*

The last thing Ransom expected to see as he rounded the corner at the end of his brisk ride was Winifred streaking across the yard toward the stable, her wet mane flying in the wind. She wore a drab gray dress which was hiked over her knees, her luscious white legs momentarily incapacitating him of thought.

Shaking off the fog that muddled his mind, he urged his mount forward and drew to a halt in her direct path. Aquamarine eyes flared as she stumbled to a halt, her mouth dropping open as though surprised to find him there.

She tried to side-step around the horse, but Ransom wielded too much control of the thoroughbred for him to be duped so easily. Her hands dropped to her side as her face fell at the futility of the situation. Sliding off his mount, Ransom eyed her with a fierce frown, wanting to reprimand her. Instead he folded his arms and glared down at her, waiting.

Agnes emerged from the front door and trotted toward them, her cap askew, gray tendrils of hair escaping her prim bun. The woman pulled to a halt beside them, her chest heaving from exertion. "I'm terribly sorry, my lord. She got away from me again. I wasn't expecting it."

Ransom cast another reprimanding stare in Winifred's direction, and much to his satisfaction she dipped her chin, a small blush evidence of her shame.

"I'll be more watchful, I swear," Agnes promised, her hands wringing her skirt anxiously.

Ransom held up his hand, halting Agnes should she wish to say more. "Leave."

Without a word the older woman bobbed, then scurried back to the manor. His regard shifted to Winifred, who remained unusually silent. He worked his jaw and cleared his throat. "Don't do that again."

Her head snapped up, and she glared at him, her lips pursed in determination. Her gaze flickered to her right, and she lurched away from him to make another foolish dash, but he was prepared. Leaping after her, he caught at her wrist, but she proved too wily, and with a simple twist she disengaged herself from his grip and sprinted along the green.

Where did she think she would go? Ransom watched her run with an amused tilt of his lips before giving chase. He ate up the distance between them with ease and managed to catch her around the waist just beyond the entrance of the stable. Her legs kicked out as she let out a squeal of dismay. Her nails bit into the flesh of his forearm, and he bit back a cry of pain and tightened his grasp around her.

She kicked and writhed in his clutches so much that he was thrown off balance by it and landed heavily into a stall, the hay buffering their fall. Winifred was on top and pushed up, her knee wedged in a very awkward place. He curled up in an attempt to protect himself.

Unaware of how close she came to unmaning him, Winifred broke free and

managed to regain her footing, but Ransom was quick to react. His hand shot out and latched onto her skirt.

"Let go!" She twisted in an attempt to dislodge him.

Undeterred, he jerked hard on the dress and brought her stumbling back into the stall, the fierceness of the battle making him smile.

Winifred eased up on her elbow and glared at him, stems of hay sticking out in her hair and along her bodice. "Don't you dare laugh at me, you great buffoon."

Clearly he was the only one that saw the risible side of the situation. Ransom couldn't help himself and broke out into loud guffaws, his lungs heaving with effort.

She punching him in the shoulder. Ransom grabbed at her closed fist and tugged her forward, his lips compressed with silent mirth. Winifred jerked back, her eyes widening as the game took a serious turn.

"Don't," she warned on a breathy whisper.

"Don't what?"

A frown creased her brow and she tugged again, yet he held fast. "I can see what you're doing. I won't let you take advantage of me." This time her voice was strong.

His good humor disappeared at her words, and he sighed. "It's not what I'm doing."

"Don't speak to me like that!"

Ransom recoiled at her heated words. Her eyes flashed at him with fury before she struggled to her feet. "Like what?"

Winifred shot him a scathing stare. "Like I'm some dim-witted ninny. I don't care for your condescension."

Ransom pushed to his feet and glowered, his jaw tensing with the effort to control his ire. He wasn't aware that she viewed his actions that way. "I apologize."

Her lips thinned, and her nostrils flared with compressed anger. "Don't apologize to me. I know those words mean nothing to you."

His mouth curved in a derisive line, and he shook his head. Words meant everything to him.

Mistaking his despondence for indifference, Winifred crossed her arms over her chest. "My reputation will be in tatters if I stay here. Do you even care? Of course not."

Ransom stared at her for a long moment. His mind ran over all the phrases available to him, yet he was unable to utilize a single one. He swallowed hard, and her gaze hardened.

"It's handled." He knew he sounded cold, yet he had no way of communicating any other way lest she discover his weakness.

Her gaze narrowed on him. "Handled? How so?"

Ransom compressed his lips. "Neely."

"Lady Neely?" she asked with an incredulous stare. At his short, stiff nod, she threw up her arms in exasperation. "Of all the under-handed scheming ... I knew it! I should have known you two were behind all this." She shot him a scathing glower.

She paced back and forth. Her mumbles of discontent and vague threats brought him to sudden awareness. She would try to escape him again, and he couldn't have her making a dash for freedom every time he turned his back. They had to come to a compromise. "One month."

Her head shot up, and she stared at him, uncomprehending. "What?"



He drew in a slow breath, concentrating on what he had to say. Already his throat ached from the effort, and he battled with the tightening in his chest from terror. "I'll return you."

She drew in a sharp breath, and her nostrils flared as her lips settled in a stiff line. "You think your ... conciliation will placate me?" she bit off. She flicked him a disdainful look. "I'll escape you yet." With that she flounced off to the manor.

## Chapter Seventeen

The scent of death permeated the air.

Ransom shivered against the cool breeze that wafted on the morning air. His red woolen coat offered him little comfort as he gripped his rifle with clammy hands. After suffering through a downpour the previous night and fortifying the Chateau, he was left with frayed nerves and exhaustion that threatened his control.

He glanced at Anterton who remained crouched beside him. His pale visage told him what he already knew. The French were going to attack. After an hour of unsuccessful field artillery bombardment, they were finally going to face a battle.

The drumming began. The rhythm signaled that death approached and sickening dread solidified. He swallowed hard at the bile that caught in his throat and wiped at his sweaty brow with trembling fingers. The tension among the guards increased as every man readied themselves for a battle to hold their ground.

Blue coats lined the sodden earth as they marched toward them, and Ransom's breathing increased to gasps of panic that rattled through his sore throat. The line of Frenchmen sent a spear of dread through him, and his self-preservation screamed at him to run for the hills. Behind him someone began to pray, and Ransom too, prayed. He asked for a miracle, but it would seem on this particular day, God wasn't inclined to listen.

"Some adventure," he said, surprising himself that he could manage some sort of sarcasm at such a time.

Anterton chuckled, though it hardly sounded like he saw the humor in the situation. Ransom couldn't blame him--he saw no humor, either.

As the flank closed in, the French surged and the battle ensued. Standing, his fingers shaking, he took aim and shot. The spark of fire and resounding boom deafened him over the war cries of those around him. Crouching, he reloaded. Sweat stung his eyes as he fumbled with the gunpowder.

He happened a glance at the attackers and gulped at the surge of panic that threatened to incapacitate him. Locking the barrel, he stood and fired, taking another Frenchman down with discriminative justice. The frenzy of war seeped into his bones, and his fingers worked quickly to ready his rifle. The constant barrage of artillery fire and yelling overrode his senses and left him floundering in a sea of bloodlust. Gunpowder singed his nostrils, and the acrid scent of blood sickened him.

To his left he saw Timothy, a young lad not much older than sixteen, aim his rifle. He grunted and jerked back as though pushed by an invisible hand. Blood spurted forth in arcs like a sickening version of a fountain, and the boy hit the ground, his hand on his wound, his blue eyes widened with disbelief.

Ransom crouched beside him, his heart racing with dread. The wound was mortal.

"I'm going to be all right, aren't I?" Timmy asked, his lower lip trembling with fear.

Ransom applied pressure to the wound, yet the blood still ran forth. "Yes," he lied.

The boy groaned as he applied more pressure, yet when he opened his eyes, the relief in his eyes caused guilt to curl in his stomach. Blood began to seep from Tim's mouth, and the relief in his gaze faded into confusion. "I feel cold."

"We're all cold," Ransom said, tears burning the back of his eyes. "Don't you worry. When we get back to England, those ladies of the *ton* will love your scar. You can regale them with your heroism."

The boy's eyes lightened. "I can, can't I?"

"Yes." But when Ransom looked up from the wound, Tim's gaze had dulled with death. Even still, blood continued to leak from his injury, and Ransom sat back in despair.

Since he joined the Guards the lad had followed him around and listened to his exaggerated tales of balls, women and duels. He found it thoroughly amusing that the fellow swallowed all he told him, but now he wasn't laughing.

In a sudden surge of life, Tim lurched up, his eyes burning red with hatred, and launched himself at Ransom. His fingers latched around his throat, cutting off the air to his lungs.

"*Je vous tuerai. Mourez-vous, chien Anglais!*" Spittle flew from his mouth and hit his cheek as Ransom gripped his attacker's wrists.

His chest was on fire, his throat ached from lack of oxygen, and he watched in horror as Tim's face transformed into his own. The eyes burned into him with hate and the mouth opened to reveal a green forked tongue.

Ransom jerked upright, his fists struck the air, and a strangled gasp hit his lungs as he lurched into wakefulness. With desperate eyes he scanned the room. The scent of gunpowder still lingered on the air. *It was just a dream*, he told himself, *there is no gunpowder*. His mind was still playing tricks on him.

Swallowing at the bile that rose up in his throat, he released a small sob, hating himself all the more for his weakness. He rubbed at his eye with the heel of his palm and grimaced at the wetness. He needed some release. With a ragged sigh, he glanced about the room. The long shadows and silver rays of the moon called to him.

\* \* \* \*

Ghostly shadows caressed the walls to her room, and Winifred curled in the sheet, her hands gripped the covers until her knuckles shone white in the darkness. The branches waved against the gale of the wind outside. The moan of the heavy oak, its gnarled fingers scratching at the window, the incessant tapping and whistling breeze created a chilling parody of an opus.

This is ridiculous, she chided herself. She had absolutely nothing to fear from the dark, yet she was unable to control the long held childhood terror that churned in her stomach. She slid up onto the bedhead, her back pressed up against the cool wood, her hands clutching the sheet to her chest. Edging to the side of the bed, she fumbled with the match and lit the lantern. The soft yellow light spread across the room and chased away the remaining shadows.

Sighing with relief, she slid back down in bed and stared at the window. The sounds, though less ominous, still waged war with her. Despite the light within, the cold moon shone its silver glow through the dry branches, and the shadows outside shifted and

moved like some wraith that hovered outside her window. The bitter wind outside increased as the branches scraped and tapped against the glass.

Pulling the sheet aside, Winifred stood. Her bare toes touched the cool wood, and she shivered against the chill of night air. Shuffling over to the window, she grasped the curtains, determined to shut out the shadows once and for all.

Movement from below caught her eye, and she squinted in the darkness at the form that marched across the lawn. Surely her mind played tricks on her. She rubbed her eyes to erase the image, but it didn't disappear. Striding toward the stable was none other than Ransom. What was he doing going for a ride at such a late hour?

Suspicion furrowed her brow, and she chewed her bottom lip in concentration. Although she had thus far been treated as her station deserved, she still remained a prisoner on this estate and was determined to find out once and for all if Ransom was involved in her attacks or was truly trying to play her champion.

Jerking the curtains shut, she scanned the room and snatched up her lantern, determined to catch him before he left the stable. Holding her hand up against the flame, she scurried down the hall, ignoring the shadows that seemed to come alive and taunt her with dark games that played on her mind.

The wind whistled through small unseen crevices, finding its way to her and wrapping cold fingers around her body. Her heart raced in her ears as her bare feet pattered down the stairs, the old house giving off strange noises that made her body to tense in repressed fear.

She scampered across the hall and eased the front door open. The force of the gale pushed at the door as though wanting entrance to the house. Cool wind bit at her face and blew locks of her hair along her face, but she ignored it as she stepped outside and forced the door shut behind her. The flame flickered against the heavy breeze, and Winifred held her hand higher to shield it, yet it did her no good as the flame wavered once more and was snuffed out by the unrelenting wind.

Now left awash in darkness, Winifred hesitated. The gloom around the trees increased and seemed to surge with glee. The silver rays of the moon did little to stay her fear. With the light that still shone from the stable as her only beacon, she dashed along the cool grass, the soles of her feet cold against the moist earth.

As she neared the stable, the sound of creaking wood registered. It was not at all like the groans of the trees fighting the wind. It was something different. Grunts and a rhythmic dull pounding traveled on the air as she slowed near the entrance. What was going on?

She peeked inside and drew in a sharp breath. Sweat glistened off Ransom's well-defined back, the muscles tensing as he punched a filled hemp sack that rocked back and forth, suspended by rope to the rafters of the stable. Like a man possessed he threw blow after blow into the bag with grunts of effort.

After one final punch at the bag, he stopped. His shoulders rose and fell as he panted, his head bowed, ignoring the sway of the makeshift punching bag. Although he appeared exhausted, his body gave him away. The rigid set of his shoulders lingered, and his hands remained clenched at his side as though waiting for another surge of some sort of primal energy.

She must have made a sound, for all of a sudden his whole body tensed as he whirled on her. The anguish written on his features pierced her heart, the dark depths of

his eyes revealing his very soul. A tormented soul.

She edged closer into the stable, her attention briefly stolen by the unfettered view she had of his naked torso. The fine sweat gleaming on his skin sucked the air from her.

She raked a slow gaze over his body, a primitive part of her enjoying the view of his chest and smooth stomach. She had never seen an unclothed man before, and she found that she like it. More than what was considered appropriate. By the time she looked up at him, his face was set in a cold mask of indifference, yet it had no real impact on her. She knew what lay behind those eyes.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He glowered at her, then retrieved a shirt that was slung over one of the stalls. She drew closer, frowning softly as she got a better view of the punching bag. The sack was well used; frays of hemp had come undone to reveal another sack beneath. What possessed a man to come down here in the middle of the night to beat an inanimate object?

When she turned back to him, she found him standing stock still, his shirt fisted in his hands. He stared at her as though waiting for her judgment. She returned his regard, waiting for him to speak, to explain himself.

His stiff façade began to crumble. His azure eyes flickered with despair, and he turned his gaze from hers. She didn't know what made her do it, but she walked up to him, touched his cheek with a soft hand, and pulled his attention back to her. His breath faltered as she searched his features.

An unspoken understanding passed between them. With a whisper of her name, which sounded like a prayer, Ransom clasped his arms around her waist, drew her flush against his body, and took her mouth with his.

The kiss was unlike any of their previous kisses. In desperation he opened her to his attack. His tongue slid into her mouth and tasted her. His lips rubbed against hers, and she was powerless against the heated wave that washed over her and settled like molten fire between her legs. He suckled on her bottom lip and kissed her again, his desperation like kindling to the flame within her.

He kissed her like she was his air, his world, his savior ... his lover. He kissed her as though she was the most beautiful person in the world, and she loved it.

Her arms wrapped around his neck, relishing his invasion. She answered him with her own exploration, and he groaned in response. A sense of recklessness overcame her.

His hot breath ran across her jawline. It sent a tingle of anticipation through her, and she tipped her head back, allowing him further access. He complied. His tongue touched her collarbone and nibbled at the soft skin there. Her breath hitched as his warm hand slid up to her shoulder and began to draw down her nightdress. The chill air touched her back, but it failed to kill her ardor as her breasts were revealed to him.

She wanted him. She wanted to dream.

His warm tongue touched her shoulder while a hand cupped her breast. He gently pinched her nipple, and she gasped at the spark of erotic heat that speared through her. She wanted more. As though hearing her unspoken demand, he took the other rose-tipped bud in his mouth and suckled. Unbelievable pleasure rolled through her, and her knees weakened.

His arm tightened behind her back, and he leant down to scoop her up in his arms.

He carried her as far as the nearest stall. The soft hay crackled under her back as he lay her down. Through heavy-lidded eyes she stared at him, her arms outstretched, calling to him.

He nudged her legs open with his, and she complied, opening for him as he settled between them. Through the thin fabric of the dress that rode up her thighs, she felt the hardness of him rock against the aching part of her. She gasped at the spiral of pleasure that unfurled there. It was a similar yet subtly different feeling than before.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, and he sought her mouth once more, his tongue stabbing in her mouth in rhythm with his thrusts against her. She moaned at the delight that roiled from the center of her outward.

He trailed hot kisses down her neck and again took one nipple in his mouth, lathering it with his tongue and rolling his teeth, ever so gently, along the hardened bud. Desperate for more, she gripped his shoulders in an attempt to convey her need. His hand slid along her waist and trailed a fiery path to the center of her.

His fingers touched her over her pantaloons, and she felt as though she was struck by lightening. She wanted it, her fingers pressing into him, urging him to continue. He ran a warm finger along her intimately, teasing her with the soft waves of pleasure that trembled through her.

“Oh ... Oh, do it,” she moaned.

His hot gaze stabbed her, his sapphire eyes gleaming with desire as he yielded to her. He kissed her fervently as he slipped a finger inside. Delicious waves of bliss spread through her. Her knees rode higher, and her eyes slid shut as she allowed the heady crescendos to take her. He slid in and out of her in slow glides, his thumb teasing a small nub that intensified the bubble of pleasure she was wrapped in. Yet, somehow, it wasn't enough. She still ached. She still wanted more.

She opened her eyes and pierced him with a heated stare. Her hand clasped him behind the neck and drew him down to her as she boldly took him in an open-mouth kiss, ravishing him with her tongue, stealing his breath. He shuddered against her and responded with just as much enthusiasm. Her legs closed around his hips, clasping him in their iron grip, demanding, calling, asking....

His finger eased out of her, and she moaned in keen disappointment. She didn't want it to end. Not now, not ever. Then something replaced it and began to ease into her. Winifred knew what it was, yet she didn't care. Anything for it continue. Anything to hold reality at bay, anything to remain forever suspended in time, in a fantasy borne of the heart.

Effulgent pleasure set her alight, and she moaned, undulating under him, asking for more. Then in one final thrust, he sheathed himself in her. The pain, though brief, was surpassed by the ecstasy that followed.

Ransom reared back, stilling within her as he stared down at her. His gaze softened, the emotion that whirled within the depths of azure difficult to decipher. His eyes ran over her features as though she were some breathtaking work of art. He ran a gentle finger along her cheek and flicked a lock of hair behind her ear. Then he moved and she gasped. Delicious tremors began as he rocked into her. This strange sense of being filled and plundered awakened long dormant desires within her, and she tilted her head back and let the blissful sensations descend upon her.

He groaned against her throat. His hot breath sent a new dimension of pleasure

flittering across her skin. Silk euphoria surged and waned in sumptuous vibrations, and as his thrusts began to pick up speed, Winifred mewled with delight.

Like a blossom opening to the sun, so did something within her, reaching, wanting ... Her fingers dug into his shoulders, her eyes snapped open as she was held suspended above the unknown, afraid to go further yet at the same time wanting to.

Then it happened. Unbelievable ecstasy radiated through her; waves and waves of indescribable rapture took her as she called out his name. Floating on the ambient cloud of repletion, she accepted the pleasure he gave as he continued thrusting into her. When he came she saw a man in the throes of pure pain or pure joy. Soft tears marked his lashes as he shuddered against her and collapsed.

Tears? Surely not.

## Chapter Eighteen

Cinnamon tickled his senses; the whisper of a breath and a soft moan touched his skin. Ransom didn't want to wake from the pleasurable dream. A dream that visited him rarely, but left him with a solid ache in his chest but feeling strangely satisfied. Winifred. His love.

Yet, no matter how much he fought it, the gray hues of the pre-dawn light woke him, and even now, the dream still lingered. The cinnamon-apple scent mingled with woman remained in the air like a phantom to taunt him.

Blinking, he groaned and rubbed the heel of his palm against his eye. He rolled over in bed and drew in a sharp breath. Luminescent skin gleamed in the dim light, the soft curve of a woman's shoulder. Winifred.

His heart fluttered with uninhibited joy as the events of the previous night washed over him. Last night hadn't been a dream. He recalled the moment with intense pleasure. It was as though someone had opened a door to his soul and shined a lantern within, chasing away his demons. Never had he felt so possessed by a woman, or so moved. She was like a siren, calling him to his death and offering him a new chance at life.

Indeed, it was true. He had suffered *la petite morte*, the little death, an old saying for women in the throes of an exquisite orgasm. He had thought it never happened to men, but it did. For it happened to him.

After they had made love in the stable, he brought her back to his room to clean away the evidence of their coupling. Yet, when he had her in his chamber, he was unable to stop himself from surrendering to the temptation to taste heaven in her arms once more. He wanted to do it right. In his eagerness to possess her, he had failed to remove her clothes or even his for that matter. Quite uncouth of him.

Gone was the wanton that met him in the stable, replaced by the shy, proper genteel woman she tried to portray. But he knew the fire that lay beneath the surface and rekindled it with a fiery kiss until she yielded to him and her body.

He had slowly undressed her, marveling at her luscious curves, and showed her with his hands and mouth how beautiful she was to him. He worshipped her from head to toe, and found a very delightful ticklish spot behind her knee in the process.

Their lovemaking had been of mutual need and playfulness that left him feeling complete. His life suddenly seemed brighter with her in the picture, and he smiled.

Shifting along the bed, he wrapped his arm around her voluptuous waist and drew her against his body. His member surged to life at the feel of her soft buttocks against him. Ignoring his need to make love to her, he gently eased her strawberry locks from the side of her face and trailed a soft finger along the column of her neck. Placing a tender kiss behind her ear, he breathed in her delicious scent and smiled as she arched into him, a soft mewl slipping past her lips.

Encouraged, he suckled her earlobe and grazed his teeth along it. Her arms stretched out and clasped him behind his neck. Her breasts thrust out from beneath the



counterpane, and he took immediate advantage, her purr of delight propelling him further as he took them to heaven once more.

\* \* \* \*

Winifred woke to the chirping sounds of robins outside her window. Today she felt oddly replete and happy. She stretched with a small groan, then breathed in deeply and frowned at the odd scent within the room.

Her eyes snapped open as she jerked upright. She wasn't in her room. The cream and gold wallpaper was similar to her own chambers, yet this one was decidedly masculine. She was in Ransom's room.

Oh my God. She had lost her virtue. Oblivious to her nakedness, she dropped her head in her hands and groaned. What possessed her to submit to him? Not once, not twice. But thrice. She moaned at the insanity of it. The sweet madness.

Resolute, she pushed her head back and stared blankly at the fireplace. What was she to do? She had to think of something to save herself from certain ruin. Scanning the room for her clothes, she found them at the edge of the bed and crawled over to retrieve them. As she slipped into her nightgown, a splash of color against the white coverlet caught her attention, and she turned to find a spray of red tulips lying upon Ransom's pillow.

Despite it all, a small smile pulled at her lips as she gathered the bouquet to her chest and touched the soft petals. Was it truly a declaration of love on his part? Her smile faded. She couldn't entertain such notions. Her childish infatuation had taught her many things, and one of them was that you risked everything if you opened your heart.

Dropping the flowers on the bed, she stood and crept from his room and into her own, thankful that as yet she hadn't been discovered. In the safety of her chambers, she sat on the edge of the bed and stared blankly at the window.

She had foolishly risked everything last night. In one fell swoop she had destroyed all her prospects of marriage. She still had to fight off fortune hungry suitors, and despite the fact that as yet she had failed to find a gentleman suitable for her. The gravity of the situation gave her a sick feeling. Overwhelmed by the combination of exquisite pleasure and heart aching for a dream, she dropped her head in her hands and drew in long slow breaths to maintain control.

At the sound of a door opening, she jerked her head up to find Agnes enter the room. Her brown eyes widened. "You're up early."

A wave of heat skittered across her cheeks followed by cold dread that settled in her stomach. Did she know? "It's not unusual for a lady to rise with the sun," she retorted.

The woman eased further into the room. "No, certainly. It's not unusual, I suppose."

Winifred tried to stave the relief that threatened her features at the realization that the woman didn't know of her nightly adventure. "So, am I to remain prisoner in this room?" she asked tartly.

Agnes glanced over at her from the armoire. "No. You were never a prisoner."

"I was abducted, and you think I'm not a prisoner?" she asked snidely.

The older woman turned around and pierced her with a stern stare. "Ransom would never act out of malice."

Winifred snorted at the woman's words. "Then you don't really know him. He is

quite malicious.” Even as the words slipped past her lips they lacked any real conviction. Last night her world shook, and now she was left to deal with old emotions that re-emerged with a vengeance despite her attempt to hold on to the past.

An uncomfortable silence fell over the room. “Ransom may not seem ... warm at times but he has a heart of gold. He just may have ... a difficult time expressing himself sometimes.”

Winifred remained silent. Agnes resumed her perusal of the armoire, then said over her shoulder, “Lord Leahaven has asked for your presence in the morning room.”

Her heart thumped against her chest, and a wave of vertigo washed over her. She didn’t want to face him. She wasn’t ready. “No.”

The maid turned to her, a bemused frown on her brow. “No?”

“I refuse to go down and see that man,” she said, crossing her arms.

“He said it’s of the utmost importance that you come down.”

Winifred paused. Was he going to relent and return her to London? Strangely, the thought filled her with disappointment and joy that mingled together in a confusing battle. “Very well.”

She stood and Agnes pulled out an amethyst gown that was seriously out of fashion. Winifred eyed the dress with curiosity as the older woman dropped it on the bed.

“Lady Leahaven was perhaps your size, I believe. I’m sure this will fit you perfectly,” Agnes said.

Winifred frowned. “I won’t wear that.”

The woman’s eyes widened at her words. “But ... but there is nothing else for you to wear.”

Eying the dress, she reluctantly ceded to her and began to undress with a sigh. After the corset was fitted, she found that Lady Leahaven was indeed her size, if a bit shorter than her by a few centimeters and lacking a bustier area. The fabric was drawn tight over her chest and Winifred was leery of drawing in a deep breath lest she tumble out of the thing. This wouldn’t do at all.

“This is scandalous. I cannot walk about like this.” Winifred indicated her breasts that struggled to remain in the bodice with every breath she took.

Agnes stood back and assessed her carefully. “Perhaps a kerchief will solve the dilemma?”

After a brief search, she managed to come up with a white scarf and Winifred adjusted it carefully over her chest, yet it still didn’t conceal the fact that the dress was far too tight.

With a sigh she followed Agnes from the room and down the stairs to an elegant morning room. Ransom looked up from his newspaper and smiled, his eyes aglitter with joy that sent her heart pattering wildly against her chest. He stood as she paused beyond the threshold, a heated blush washing over her cheeks as he motioned for her to sit.

She stared at the large table and thought to take the seat furthest from him, but hesitated. She couldn’t have him thinking she was afraid of him. Accepting the turned out seat across from him, she swallowed hard and she turned her gaze from him.

She knew it was cowardly of her, but she was unable to look him in the eyes and instead focused her attention on her surroundings. Light filtered through the room and splashed against the smooth wooden panel walls and across the white table cover. Dark

burgundy curtains were pulled back to reveal the rolling hills beyond, reminding her of her lack of a morning ride. She stifled the disappointment.

Ransom cleared his throat, and Winifred turned to him. "Good morning," he said stiffly.

"Good morning," she said with a breathy whisper. What should she say to the man to whom she had gifted her virtue?

He frowned, his jaw tensing as a fine bead of sweat popped up on his brow. He appeared frustrated, and Winifred was at a loss as to why. The silence in the room thickened, and she shifted in her seat.

"Tea?" he asked, indicating the teapot between them.

When she nodded mutely, he stood and walked over to her with teapot in hand. It was unusual for a lord to do so when he had servants aplenty, but Winifred wasn't inclined to point that out. She remained still as he leaned over her to pour the tea.

His arm brushed against hers. Her heart fluttered and a warm pool of desire settled in her stomach. His unique woodsy scent wafted over her, and she cursed her weak heart as images of the previous night flashed before her eyes.

"Sugar?" he asked.

She looked up at him and shook her head. He remained leaning over her, his sapphire eyes darkening with intensity as he searched her face. He appeared quite intent on something, and she felt as though he could see her every thought, even the scandalous ones.

She dropped her attention to the steaming china cup, and drew it to her, curving her finger along the fine gold rim in an attempt to distract herself. But it did little good. Her heart raced in her ears, and her traitorous body yearned for him to take her in his arms. Those strong, smooth--

Ransom cleared his throat as he straightened, and Winifred looked at him in askance. His brow furrowed, his hand slipped in his vest pocket and pulled out a slip of paper. The parchment was old and well frayed as he unfolded it and stared at the contents on the page with grave consideration.

He licked his lips and glanced at her, his expression taut with annoyance. Clearing his throat he dropped to one knee and grasped on hand in his. Winifred's heart leapt in her throat, and she battled between uninhibited joy and fear.

"Win ... will you ... ma ... mar," he rasped, his face contorted into one of pure frustration, killing her short-lived elation as anxiety solidified.

She pulled her hand from his. It was clear to her that she was but a responsibility, and despite herself her foolish heart believed in him ... in them ... in love. With trembling fingers she brought the cup to her lips and sipped. The taste barely registered beyond the ache in her chest.

Ransom dropped his head then drew in a slow breath, his hands clenched at his side, crumbling the parchment in one fist. When he looked up again, his gaze stabbed at her, his lips settled in a stiff line. "Marry me."

Winifred recoiled. "No."

His eyes widened, and his mouth dropped open, clearly surprised by her vehement rejection.

"Come now, my lord," she said with false gaiety. "Let's not fool each other. You and I both know it's not something we want to do."

She wanted him to deny it, to say that he did truly want to marry her. Her heart yearned for it over the screaming protestations of her head. She waited in tense anticipation for him to force his issue, but he merely dropped his head for a moment and stood. When he did deign to look at her, his face was set in a cold mask of indifference. "No," he rasped.

She licked her lips, and her hands gripped the tiny cup for reassurance, but the warmth of the porcelain failed to penetrate the coldness that ran across her skin.

"I ... it was a wondrous experience for me, but let's not fool ourselves into thinking that this would work. We hardly even know each other, really. I mean, you don't love me, and I..." She shrugged, letting the sentence trail off lest she reveal more than she was willing to give.

She regarded him for a cool moment, her features carefully arranged into vague disinterest, yet she remained drawn taut, waiting for his reply. Waiting for him to prove her wrong and tell her he loved her, he always had. Yet when he remained in stoic silence, a yawning gap opened within her, and she found she had lost her appetite. She stood, a stiff smile on her lips.

"If you'll excuse me," she murmured, afraid her voice would fail her.

He stepped aside, and she forced herself to walk calmly from the room, her heart breaking ... yet again.

Ransom watched her leave, his body rigid with frustration and pain. Clenching his jaw, he turned from her retreating back and stared blankly at the mahogany wall. His breath came in gusts in an attempt to control the agony that clenched over his heart and reverberated through his body. He had laid his soul open to her, and she had crushed it with one word.

He opened his hand and unfurled the special license in his hand, a ragged sigh slipping past his lips. Why had he kept it after all these years? Not a day went by when he didn't wonder about her and what life would have been like if he hadn't listened to Anterton.

Would they have proved him wrong and remained happy, or would he be left with a constant reminder that he had destroyed their love? He wanted to scream and rage at the injustice of it all. Even now, he was left with this reminder. He had never tasted true happiness before he was cast into hell.

Absently he picked up her teacup and held the tender porcelain in his hand. Then he hurled it into the wall beyond, the cup shattering into a thousand pieces.

He was cursed with the inability to speak, cursed that his heart still remained fixated on Winifred. He cursed the wager that put her in his path ... and cursed Winifred.

He groaned, the sound reminiscent of a wounded animal. He wanted to tell her she was wrong, that he *wanted* to marry her, but, damn it! He couldn't. Never more so than now did he revile his disability. His chance to set things right, to create a new life with Winifred, failed under his inability to form one damned sentence.

His hands gripped the table as he tried to maintain some sort of control. His chest heaved from the pain of it, and he gritted his teeth as her words whirled through his head. His quick and sure reply would follow in a dream world that would never exist.

With a growl of rage, he pounded the oak table. The pain in his hand failed to compete with the agony that rolled through his entire body and to his dismay, tears of frustration and agony that glazed his eyes.

A sentence flittered in his mind and he focused on it. *We hardly know each other.* He paused. She felt something for him, he knew it. She must. Hope took flight within him. If she felt they needed to become reacquainted, then that was something he could rectify.

\* \* \* \*

Ransom stood by the stable the following morning, the beauty of the bright morning sun and singing birds in the distance lost on him as he paced back and forth. He had requested Winifred's presence this fine morning, and she had yet to make an appearance.

He glanced at the manor door and released a growl of frustration. He had remained in his own room last night despite his yearning to hold her in his arms, determined to find the way to her heart by taking it slow and showing her how he felt. But how was he to reacquaint her with him if she refused to spend time with him?

As though sensing his frustration, his black thoroughbred tossed its head and snorted, pawing the ground in discontent. Absently he rubbed his hand along the smooth coat on its strong neck in reassurance, his attention remaining on the front door.

His frustration burned under the hot anger that threatened to boil over. It was clear she refused to come. He glanced over at George, holding the reins of the mare he had specifically chosen for Winifred, and jerked his head back in the direction of the stable.

With a stiff nod of understanding, the young man returned the mount to the stable. Ransom cast a glance at the door, hoping that she would finally make an appearance, but when she didn't emerge he mounted his horse in one smooth motion. He glared at the back of his thoroughbred's head, his fingers tightening around the leather of the reins.

After several deep breaths, he urged his mount into a canter, taking one last glance at the front of the manor to find Winifred standing just beyond the porch, her eyes wide with hesitation. His lips thinned as he jerked his horse around and drew to a halt beside her. Her mouth parted as he glared down at her. The gales of his anger battered against him, yet under her confused stare his heart thumped against his chest and his anger drowned in her aquamarine depths.

Without a word he held down his hand, his palm open to her. Her gaze flickered with hesitation before she eased her fingers into his. Grasping her hand, he pulled her up onto his mount, ignoring her gasp of surprise as she dropped heavily into the saddle in front of him.

Urging the mount forward, he clasped her around the waist and drew her against his body. It was a mistake. The heady scent of her skin and the softness of her body warmed and titillated him, reminding him of the yearning need that remained with him through the night and now raised its head on feeling the womanly softness against him.

Gritting his teeth, he drew in deep breaths through his nose, but it did him little good as cinnamon and fresh soap invaded his senses. He ached to pull the horse to a halt and take Winifred on the grass, against a tree or even while still in the saddle. Anything to satisfy this need that had intensified all the more since he had tasted heaven.

"Where are you taking me?"

Winifred's question jerked him out of his heated contemplation, and he shook his head in an attempt to clear the erotic images that flashed before his eyes. "Somewhere nice."

She shifted in the saddle and she turned to look at him. Ransom gritted his teeth all the more, fine beads of sweat breaking over his forehead. He needed to remain in control, yet the battle for dominance of his primal need waned under the vision that stared at him, her soft lips parted a fraction, begging to be kissed.

"Are ... are you planning to seduce me?" Winifred's cheeks darkened to a delightful shade of pink as she dropped her gaze.

Yes. "No," he rasped.

"Oh." Was that disappointment he heard in her voice? Surely not.

Thankfully she remained silent as he veered his mount over the rolling fields and finally into a small alcove of trees and a secret garden that had remained his sanctuary for the last six years. Never had he shown anyone this before. Within the gathering of trees lay a small pond. It was hardly as impressive as the one in Saint James's park, but still quite breathtaking in its own way.

Light splintered through the tree like the fingers of God and shone down onto the water that reflected the rays of the sun. The field was now awash with wild daisies and daffodils, the tones of yellow, white and green intermixed. The songs of native birds added a sense of peace to the place.

Pulling his horse to a halt, he dismounted and grasped her waist, easing her to the ground. In an attempt to conceal his arousal he turned from her and removed the small package of morning tea that he had asked cook to prepare. Laying a small picnic mat upon a patch of ground vacant of flowers, he lay out the food and settled on the mat to observe Winifred.

She looked ravishing in a simple gown that looked vaguely familiar, though it wasn't the same dress he'd abducted her in. Her hair was held back in a proper bun, yet several tendrils had come loose and waved along the arch of her neck and along her back with the breeze. All in all, she was a sight to behold, and he ached to remove her gown and worship her in his little piece of heaven.

"This is beautiful," she murmured.

Ransom smiled and leaned back. "Come here," he rasped.

Winifred glanced at him over her shoulders and faltered. Her gaze turned back to the lake, but she remained where she stood. Smiling to himself, he picked up the apple and strode over to her. Halting behind her, he held the fruit before her eyes. She accepted it without question.

His hands wrapped around her waist, and he breathed in her scent. His heart pattered against his chest, as she made no move to extricate herself from his grasp. He dropped his head and hesitated near her bare shoulder, wanting to taste her delicateness but fearing it was too much. A shudder ran through her, revealing the truth. He smiled and kissed her collarbone, her neck arching back in compliance.

Hot desire washed through his body in a languid wave that tingled along his skin and left him taut with passion. He breathed along her neck and relished the next shiver that coursed through her, knowing she wanted him. She yearned for his touch as much as he did her. He blinked at the thought and hesitated. This wasn't what he had intended.

Battling with his physical desires and the desire of his heart, he sighed and released her, taking a safe step back lest he fall victim to his primal needs and ravish her in the grass. He dipped his head and drew in slow breaths in order to gain control, his gaze focused on a single blade of grass, blanking out all but that image.

He heard fabric shift and tensed, knowing she regarded him. After a moment to regain his composure, he cleared his throat and looked up. Her eyes pierced him with their loveliness, and he clenched his hands to hold himself at bay.

"I apologize," he said.

Her brow furrowed in bemusement, and she glanced down at the apple that remained in her hand before she looked back at him.

"When are you going to return me to London?" she asked without looking at him. *Never.* "Soon."

She turned and stared at him. "Then I would like to write a letter to my family. They know me and will eventually see through Lady Neely's contrived lie. They will be very worried about me if they don't hear anything from me."

He knew there was risk in her contacting her family, but he found himself reluctant to deny her and nodded.

The smile that broke over her features almost proved worth it, but then her grin faded and her eyes dulled. "Why did you bring me here, to this place?" Her hand swept over the lake.

His lips pursed. He knew this question would arise and had practiced a few phrases meticulously the previous night to assure his disability would appear less evident. Yet, faced with the moment, his throat closed up, and he feared he would be unable to utter the simple sentence.

"I am ... courting you," he said woodenly.

Her eyes widened a fraction, and an emotion reflected in her gaze, an emotion he was familiar with. Misery. But then Winifred surprised him by laughing, a soft tinkling sound, as though she was amused by something he said. "Come now, I hardly think that you need to lie to me. What's done is done. I'm not going to hold you responsible for what happened."

Surely she didn't believe that was the reason he pursued her. *It's not the reason. I love you. I want to create a new life with you.* His throat closed up, and he struggled to utter the words he wanted. "It's not ... like that."

She turned away from him and Ransom stood behind her, his body tensed to hold him back from taking her in his arms. If he couldn't tell her how he felt, and he wouldn't show her, then what else was there left for him to do?

"Is it not? It's the second time you have proposed marriage to me. The second time you have courted me. How can I believe the integrity of your motives this time?"

The confusion and misery in her voice prompted him to step forward, but he stopped himself from drawing her into him. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't. He had hurt her deeply and cringed inwardly at the sting of her censure.

"I ... have changed," he rasped, his throat aching with the effort to speak with some semblance of emotion.

She laughed, a cold grating sound that lacked any true humor. "Haven't we all?"

A wave of pure misery ripped at him as she wrapped her arms around herself, and for the first time he realized the true extent of her misery. Despite the chirping birds and bright rays of the sun, she looked alone in a field full of yellow daffodils, and for the second time in his life, Ransom despaired as she failed to see the true extent of his pain and the depth of his need.





## Chapter Nineteen

The battle for Hougoumont Chateau intensified, and Ransom lurched back from the sound of gunfire and war cries. His heart was in his throat as he drew his rifle, aimed at a French soldier, and fired. The explosion of gunpowder deafened him and under the order to retreat he pushed to his feet and ran for the gates of Hougoumont.

He scrambled over dead bodies in an attempt to save himself, and panic and dread whirled inside him. He stumbled, caught off guard by an injured Guard's hand tapping his ankle. Pushing to his feet, he turned back and stared at the young man, whose other hand clasped over a thigh that oozed with blood.

"Help me," he cried, his brown eyes wide with fear.

Ransom glanced at the approaching enemy and briefly considered leaving the fellow behind, but was immediately pierced with shame. Grasping the fellow's arm, he eased him up, and they both stumbled for the gate.

"Come on!" One of the soldiers waved at them.

Gasping for air that was sucked out of him by panic, he stared at the walls of Chateau Hougoumont in despair. The French were breaking through the walls and against the gate. He, along with several other Guards, pushed at the gate to keep the enemy at bay.

"Come on, lads," cried the lieutenant. "Heave, boys. Heave!"

Ransom pushed and glanced at Anterton who stood ready with his pistol. Their eyes met and a message of understanding passed. This might well be the very last day of their lives. Desperation bit at the edge of his panic, and he leaned into the gate--but to no avail. The French broke through the entrance and battled for the Chateau.

Red and blue jackets fought to the death. Ransom quickly loaded his gun as a Frenchman vaulted over his dead comrades and launched himself at him. He tried to evade him, but he was too slow and hit the ground heavily. Strong fingers closed around his neck and squeezed, cutting off all his oxygen.

*"Je vous tuerai. Mourez-vous, chien Anglais!"* Blue eyes flashed with bloodlust as spittle hit Ransom's cheek.

Leahaven grasped his enemy's fingers, trying vainly to loosen him, but the blackness of unconsciousness threatened to consume him. His lungs burned from lack of air; his mouth opened as he gagged against the effort. The Frenchman laughed maniacally and squeezed all the more. He was dying.

*Wake up! It's but a dream! Wake up, damn you, wake up!*

\* \* \* \*

Winifred lay curled in bed, her body aching for something that was just beyond her reach and only beyond the door. She glared at the door in the darkness and noticed the flickering light beneath. He was still up.

She chewed on her lower lip in contemplation. Despite the fact that she tried to remain distant to him, she still yearned for his touch. Over the past two nights she had wondered why he didn't insist he share her bed. Her cheeks warmed at the thought that

both titillated and shamed her.

She could hardly recognize herself anymore. One part of her yearned for his touch, while another part wanted more than just the physical and wanted the whole fantasy that seemed to tease her with its elusiveness. She groaned and rolled over to stare at the ceiling with unseeing eyes.

Courting her? She released a derisive laugh. Ransom was no longer the smooth charmer she knew, and had difficulty lying to her. She huffed with disdain at the pang of hurt embedded in her heart, the pain that revealed itself this very afternoon and humiliated her.

Her body had wished for him to take her in a bed of daffodils while her mind screamed for control. Yet it was he that displayed control and remained ever so distant, an action that battered against her fragile self-esteem.

With a growl of frustration she rolled out of bed. She approached the adjoining door, her hand hesitating at the door handle. Did she have the courage? She pressed her ear against the wood, listened carefully, and frowned. Who was he talking to? The muffled sounds increased with urgency, and Winfred hesitated for a fraction before she opened the door.

There was no one in the chamber except Ransom, who thrashed in the bed, caught in the throes of a dream. One lone candle flickered on the other side of the room. The long shadows acted like sinister characters called up from the depths of hell.

"No ... no," Ransom gagged.

Chewing her lower lip, she battled with her conscience and her head. She couldn't leave him like this. Determined, she strode over to the side of the bed. His arms flailed as he writhed in some imaginary fight to the death, his mouth opened as he released a strangled sound.

He wasn't breathing!

"Ransom, wake up," she said, her fingers tapping his shoulder.

He jerked away from her, still caught in the throes of a nightmare.

She crawled onto the side of the bed and shook him. "Ransom. Ransom. Wake up!"

He jerked upright with a roar, and Winifred squealed and tumbled back, falling off the edge of the bed and hitting the floor with a dull thud. Staring dazed at the ceiling as the world whirled before her eyes briefly, she cursed herself for coming in the room.

The mattress shifted. "Win?"

Winifred sat up and glared at him over the mattress, but his dejected form gave her pause. Standing, she eased onto the side of the mattress and stared at him. His face was averted from her. "A nightmare?"

He chuckled, a sound between a derisive laugh and a sob. His hand rubbed over his face as he sniffled. Was he crying?

"Are ... are you all right?"

His shoulders shook all the more, and she feared she faced a man caught in the vice grip of misery, but her fear was short lived as he lifted his head and laughed, a maniacal sound that sent cold fingers of dread up her spine.

Then he pierced her with a stare, his azure eyes glazed with tears and rage. "All right?" he sneered, as though the concept was purely laughable.

Winifred shifted on the mattress and glanced back at the door to the room,

wishing she had never stepped past the threshold.

"Scared?"

She turned to look at him, her heart thumping at the snide set of his features and the rage that emanated from his body. She shook her head, though inwardly she shook with fear, for in the dim light, he looked truly sinister.

"You ... should be." His jaw tensed, and he dropped back on his pillow and dropped his arm over his eyes as though he hadn't just been talking to her.

Winifred hesitated, and glanced back at the door once more.

"Leave," he said woodenly.

It was the opening she required, and she moved to stand but faltered. She heard the misery behind his voice and knew she couldn't leave the room without feeling guilty and cursed her weak heart. Shifting on the mattress, she raised a hand, hesitated, and dropped it on his thigh, the fabric of the sheet the only barrier between her skin and his.

His arm raised and he peered at her.

"Do you wish to talk about it?" she asked gently.

"No," he bit off and turned away from her.

Winifred remained in silence for a moment before she stood and started to leave the room.

"Wait."

She stopped and turned, her face set into a mask of indifference as she stared at him. Ransom sat up, his naked chest not wasted on her as her heart pattered wildly.

"Do ... you know ... about the war?"

Winifred nodded in the dim light.

"I was at..." He swallowed, his adam's apple bobbed as he appeared to struggle with what he had to say. "Château Hougoumont."

Stifling the gasp that came to her lips, she remained where she stood, determined to hear what he had to say.

"Then you have you heard of *Sous-Lieutenant Legros*?" he asked haltingly, his voice rasping with pent-up emotion.

She nodded. Indeed, she had heard of the horrific nickname he was given. *The Smasher*. She shivered that Ransom would even mention that man's name. "Is it true that he wielded an axe and broke through the gate?"

Ransom eyed her for a quiet moment, and she regretted her thoughtless words. "Yes," he whispered.

Winifred remained quiet, her hands clasped before her.

He cleared his throat and tilted his head as though recalling a moment long ago. "He broke ... through and ... a soldier. Attacked me. He had me"--his hand indicated his neck--"by the throat. But managed ... to get the ... better hand. Next thing I knew...." He heaved a sigh and shook his head as he fell into silence.

Winifred took a step closer to the bed and sensed his battle to reveal the tale.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

He looked up at her and for the first time she noticed the glimmer of fine tears that marked his lashes. "I can't speak," he said haltingly.

Winifred nodded, knowing his pride was still strong. "It's all right. I understand."

He chuckled derisively. "No ... you don't. Have you not noticed?"

Winifred stiffened at the maniacal look that entered his eyes. She thought to leave, yet she found herself unable to, as she remained caught in a story that was yet to be revealed.

"I woke ... unable to speak," he rasped. "I was told I had taken a blow to the side of the head by the blunt head of Legros's axe. I was supposed to be glad I survived. Glad that I was left with this disability and retained my life. But what did I have to come back to? Nothing! I have nothing. The man with the golden tongue," he spat out the words with fury, "is no more. I have gotten my just desserts."

Slowly everything she knew about him began to fall into place; the cold conversations, the abruptness and odd behavior. All this time she had thought him cold and unfeeling--or she had been too angry to notice. She recalled how in her time of misery after he had abandoned her that she had wished for something similar to befall him, thinking that she would laugh in his face. Now, she didn't feel like laughing.

"Can you ... stay ... with me?" he asked, his voice strained.

Sensing his pride, Winifred walked over and sat on the edge of the bed. Ransom slid over on the mattress and held open the sheet for her. Without question she slid her feet under the coverlet and lay back. His unique scent wafted over her, and desire coiled within her.

"Let me ... hold you," he whispered, and he drew her against his body.

Winifred shivered at the warmth that enveloped her body. His strong arm wrapped gently around her waist, starting an ache in her heart she thought she had long outgrown. His breath tickled the back of her neck and tendrils of hair shifted as he ran a smooth finger along her cheek and hooked it behind her ear.

She turned her head to find him resting on an upraised hand staring at her. The air sizzled with tension, and her breath faltered as he lowered his head and brushed his lips against hers. A bolt of lightening struck her, and she opened her mouth, eager to feel heaven once more.

His tongue ran along the seams of her mouth in a seductive but gentle foray that left her wanting. When he pulled back, she was unable to stop the whimper of disappointment.

"Not tonight," he whispered, and he drew her flush against his body. "Sleep. Sleep? How could she when she was wound tight like a fob watch?"

\* \* \* \*

The light the light that splintered through the thick curtains woke Ransom from a peaceful slumber. It was an unusual experience to wake with his arms around the soft pliant curves of a woman, and not just any woman, but Winifred. His arm rested against her waist and gave him an odd sense of comfort. Easing onto his elbow, he stared at her sleeping form and smiled. His heart swelled with love and a sense of completion enveloped him.

He had expected gloating or some sort of rejection from her, but never had he expected acceptance. With a reluctant sigh, he eased his arm from her. A soft moan escaped her as she snuggled against him, and he gritted his teeth as desire pooled within him. He didn't want to take advantage of her; he wanted her to know him, and to become comfortable around him and eventually decide to accept his suit.

With determination, he held her hips still and eased from her to eventually roll out of bed. He threw on his robe, grabbed a few articles of clothing, and left the room to

change in the antechamber before leaving for the morning room.

Today, the sun shone brighter than it had in a long while, and he felt that everything was finally going to go his way. He grinned to himself and strolled happily down the hall. In the morning room, breakfast was already served, and Ransom immediately took advantage of the marmalade toast and grabbed a cup of tea.

He left the room and made his way to the study where he intended to begin his correspondence for the day. The study was already awash with light, the thick curtains drawn back to allow maximum light and a wondrous view of the estate garden. Easing a window open, he chewed absently at the morning toast and breathed in the soft flowery scent that wafted into the room.

Turning, he set his tea down and sat in the large leather-backed chair. He was examining the accounts when the sound of scurrying steps drew his attention. Frowning, he stood as the door to his study opened to allow a very disheveled Percival. His brown eyes were wide with desperation, his hair windblown, which was quite unusual for his tight-laced appearance.

"My lord," he breathed. "I came as soon as I could."

Ransom's bemusement grew at his secretary's words. "What?"

Percival dropped into the nearest chair, pulled out a handkerchief, and wiped at his forehead before shoving it back into his breast pocket. "News about Winifred and you is making the rounds in the gossip mill."

Cold dread killed off his short-lived joy, and his eyes narrowed. "What news?"

"That you killed Winifred and have fled the country!"

Ransom's brows shot up. "That's absurd!"

"Indeed, it is, my lord. But due to Lady Winifred's sudden disappearance, and Lady Neely claiming that you were the last to be with her ... and the history between the two of you. Well, need I say more?"

Ransom glowered. "What ... did Neely say?"

Percival swallowed. "It was all taken out of proportion I'm sure."

"What did she say?" he enunciated through gritted teeth.

"Merely that you and Lady Winifred had eloped."

Ransom groaned and dropped back into his seat. He had hoped that she would come up with a believable lie, not a bald-faced one.

"It worked for a few days, but when there was no word from you or Lady Winifred, that is when the rumors went out of control."

Ransom rubbed his hand over his face in agitation. "What is being said now?" he asked slowly.

Percival's face reddened as he refused to meet his stare. "Oh, that you kidnapped Lady Winifred in the hope that she would elope with you, but when she dissented, you killed her."

Ransom absorbed the knowledge with careful consideration of all options. "What do you know ... of her killer?"

His secretary's eyes rounded. "But you didn't kill her."

Ransom rolled his eyes. "I know that! I mean the real one."

"Oh. I have yet to find anything substantial," he said evasively.

"What have you found?"

Percival cleared his throat. "Nothing."

Ransom dropped his head. This was a disaster. He wasn't ready to return Winifred to society. Not because it would alleviate the rumors surrounding her untimely 'death', but because he *wanted* her here. With him. Indeed, returning her would expunge him of all guilt, but her reputation would be left in ruins.

He quickly ran over several ideas and discarded them. There was simply no other avenue available to him other than doing what was right, although he didn't relish the idea.

He would invite Winifred's family to stay at his estate for the remainder of the season. The question now was whether she would be willing to go along with his plan.

He leaned back in his seat and sighed, his index fingers templed as he regarded Percival who remained stiff in his seat, his attention focused determinedly on something on the floor. Ransom cleared his throat, and his secretary was forced to look up, his brown eyes wide with trepidation.

"We shall send an invitation," Leahaven said.

"Excuse me, my lord?"

"Invite Lady Samford," he rasped through stiff lips.

Percival nodded, though he hardly looked as though he understood his reasoning.

"Very good, my lord."

Lifting his teacup, Ransom took a casual sip and peered at Percival who remained seated where he was, his hands clasped together as his fingers fidgeted in agitation. "Is there something else?"

His man of affairs' adam's apple bobbed furiously. "Lady Maypin is up in arms about this whole debacle. She believes that you murdered her niece and is determined to see you clapped in chains."

Ransom's lips thinned at the mention of that woman. In fact, he suspected that Lady Maypin relished the idea that her niece had failed to find a suitable match after the scandal. "Very well, invite her also."

Percival stood and bowed. "I will attend to it straight away and extend the invitation, my lord." He scurried from the room, leaving Leahaven with his thoughts.

What a conundrum. He had hoped to have more time with Winifred in order to woo her, but it would seem that fate was against him. He stared blankly at the accounts and pondered his current predicament. Should Winifred fail to agree to his plan, he would be left with little recourse but to watch her be ruined by his ill-thought plan. His lips thinned at the idea.

"What the devil have you done!"

Ransom jerked his head up at the screech of outrage to find Agnes striding in the room. Her eyes blazed with fury as she slammed her hands down on the table.

"You have defiled that young woman upstairs," Agnes spat. "I thought I raised you better, but it would seem that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

Ransom glowered at the reference of his father. A deep-seated black rage roiled in his stomach as he pulled back on his instinct to set her in her place.

"I cannot believe you left her open to the scorn of the servants."

Ransom frowned. He had done no such thing. "What?"

"Don't you 'what' me, young man. I saw her this morning in your room."

"We didn't do anything," he said with excruciating slowness.

"Don't feed me that balderdash. I'm not so old that I don't recognize what I saw."

Whether you made love to her or not is hardly the point. The issue here is that she *spent the night* in your room!"

Ransom sighed and rubbed his forehead. He throat ached terribly from the amount of use thus far, and he wished for this conversation to end. "She's going to marry me," he said. Well, at least he hoped she was going to.

Agnes's mouth dropped open, then snapped shut as her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Are you fibbing me, lad?"

Ransom stared into the older woman's eyes. "No. I already have the special license on hand."

Agnes chuckled. "Not the same one you have kept for the last five years?"

Ransom glowered. "It will serve."

She pushed off the table and folded her arms around her buxom chest. "So I take it she has yet to agree to your proposal."

"What makes you think that she hasn't already?"

Agnes raised that infamous brow of hers that always pierced through his façade. "Is that so?"

His lips thinned though he refused to deny it.

She chuckled, and his scowl deepened. His gaze cut across the room to find Winifred standing beyond the threshold, her eyes wide with hesitation. He stood and Agnes turned.

"I-I'm sorry. I didn't know you had company," Winifred said, her hands clasped before her.

"It's all right," he rasped.

Agnes inclined her head and left the room, leaving Ransom alone with her. They stood in silence for a moment before he motioned to the divan. "Sit."

Winifred hesitated, but made her way further into the room. She sat on the edge of the seat and stared up at him.

"I have invited ... your family to the estate," he said after a moment of silence.

Instant joy lit up her eyes, and her hands rose to her lips. The pain that she would be so eager to see her family cut at him. Was she so eager to return to London after all that they had shared?

Slowly the elation began to dissipate from her eyes and a furrow formed on her brow. "What does this mean?" she asked, her tone colored with suspicion.

Ransom cleared his throat. He couldn't tell her the truth, yet he had little doubt that her family would enlighten her immediately. "There have been ... some rumors that need ... to be dispelled."

Her eyes narrowed. "What type of rumor?"

Ransom released a casual shrug that was at odds with everything else in his body. "There may have been ... some assumptions drawn ... regarding your safety."

Winifred dipped her head and Ransom was unable to decipher her emotions.

"Are you allowing me to return to London?" She looked up at him, her eyes glimmering with ... hopeful expectation?

His lips thinned. "Perhaps," he said evasively.

"Oh." She dipped her head. Her hands clenched before her and after a moment she stood. "Excuse me."

Ransom clenched his fingers against the edge of the table. His gaze drank in her

retreating form, yearning to take her in his arms and tell her ... tell her what?

That he would never let her go. That he loved her. Would she accept that? He sighed and dropped his attention to the floor. Never.



## Chapter Twenty

Winifred stared out the window as the carriage trundled up the drive and brushed the soft petals of a red rose against her cheek. Though it was common, the message was timeless and she contemplated the meaning behind it. For the last several days she had remained in her room at night, but she found that Ransom was not in his. It never failed that in the morning she would find a flower on the pillow of her bed. The thought that Ransom entered her room at night filled her with ... what?

She didn't know. A part of her despaired that her family had arrived, while another part rejoiced. Could it truly be over? She sighed and breathed in the heady scent of the flower. It couldn't be. The flower itself attested to his feelings. In her room she had a vase with a quince. Its mauve petals were wilted, but she was loath to throw it away. Temptation. Was that the reason Ransom had abandoned his room? That he found her too tempting?

She released a derisive laugh and dipped her head. No. More fool she, should she think that. In the few times she had been in his presence he was ... cordial to her. It was almost as if those nights in his bed never happened, as if something in his world had shifted just as it had in hers. Yet while he was indifferent to her presence, she found that she was not indifferent to his.

"Come, my lady," Agnes said, pulling her from her morose contemplations. "You must greet your family."

Winifred turned from the window and inclined her head. With little thought she followed the maid along the hall, down the stairs and outside. Ransom stood outside, his hands clasped behind his back. His smooth form sent tendrils of desire to coil within despite herself. He turned his head, and upon seeing her, he merely inclined his head. The motion stabbed at her heart, but before she could do anything else, he turned away from her. Dismissed.

Winifred remained behind him, her gaze fixated on his back that remained tense in readiness. She wanted him to acknowledge her, to bring her to his side and greet her family like ... like what? Like they were in love? She was a fool.

The carriage pulled to a halt before the manor, and Winifred tensed as the door opened and her mother alighted from the carriage. "Mother," she cried and ran into her mother's arms.

Lady Samford's arms drew her in a warm embrace. Winifred felt as though the weight of the world was lifted from her shoulders, as though all her woes would disappear, and like a child, Winifred gave in for the first time in a month and wept out her frustration.

After a moment she brought her emotions under control and pulled from her mother. The soft hands encompassed Winifred's face; the balls of the countess' thumbs wiped at her cheeks.

"There, there. I'm here now."

Winifred nodded as she stared into the concerned visage of her mother. "I'm all

right, mother.”

“I have been so worried about you,” Lady Samford said. “When you disappeared, and I received no word, I was worried ill had befallen you.”

Shame pierced her with cold fingers. She had thought little of her family after her arrival at the estate and put off writing the letter promised to her by Ransom for a reason she was unable to fathom. “I’m sorry.”

“Has that scoundrel taken advantage of you?”

Heat crawled up her skin like a telltale flag to the truth. “No, mother.”

Lady Samford’s lips pursed and Winifred feared that her lie was discovered.

“Well,” her mother said, handing her a handkerchief. “Dry your tears. We came all the way from London to see how you fared.”

Wiping at her tears, Winifred pulled back from her mother and smiled. Her mother’s attention shifted to Ransom, and her concern melted into a fierce glower. “You, sir, have much to answer for.”

Winifred turned to find Leahaven had barely moved since her mother’s arrival and merely inclined his head a fraction.

“You scoundrel. Have you nothing to say? You have stolen my daughter from me despite my warnings. What did you promise her to lure her away?”

His lips thinned as a muscle ticked in his cheek. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Lady Samford scoffed. “Do you realize--”

“Mother, please,” Winifred interceded in an attempt to calm her as the servants looked on at the vulgar display of emotion. But it was little use as her mother continued over her protests.

“Do you realize that you have compromised my daughter? Were I a man I would demand satisfaction.” She stared at him with icy disdain. “You have shamed my family greatly and brought ruin onto my poor child. I warned you, sirrah, to stay away from us. But it’s clear to me that it was a mistake on my part to expect you to act honorably. It shan’t happen again. Come, Winnie, we are going home.”

Winifred glanced at Ransom to find his gaze had darkened to black ice, his body stiff and unyielding in the face of Lady Samford’s attack.

“Lady Samford,” Ransom said stiffly. “It would ... be best if you to stay. If only for the night. I trust your ... trip was tiring.”

Winifred dipped her head as the pain of rejection flayed her heart. His willingness to let her go cut into her as she was left to face the truth. It was truly over. He had showed her exquisite pleasure and broke down the walls to her heart piece by piece until she was left vulnerable to his attacks. She wished to leave immediately, yet a part of her was desperate for the last few hours she would have with him.

Her mother stared down her nose at Leahaven. “You think that *I* would allow my daughter to spend one more night under *your* roof?”

“She will be chaperoned.”

“Do you not understand that you have already ruined my daughter?” Lady Samford said incredulously. “She will be a pariah among her peers, no longer welcome in the highest of circles, thanks to your selfish actions.”

Ransom remained silent for a moment. His attention shifted to Winifred, the emotion in his eyes undecipherable. “I can offer reparation,” he said, his regard returning to the countess. “We can marry.”

Winifred gasped as joy caused her heart to flutter, but then cold reality pierced her bubble as she stared at the cold indifference that marked his features. Clearly, this was a man fulfilling his duty to her, and she came crashing down to earth in screaming misery, her mother's sputtered in protest lost on her.

"She most certainly will not! What do you offer her beyond a miserable marriage?" Lady Samford demanded.

His mouth parted as though he wished to say something, but then he sighed and bowed forward a fraction as though deferring to her mother's heated objection. He held out his hand and motioned to the manor. "Would you care to come into the drawing room for some refreshments?"

Winifred blinked, flummoxed at the ease with which he spoke the sentence. But her amazement was lost on the rest of the family as he turned and returned inside, not waiting to see if they would agree to his offer or remain standing like vagabonds outside his manor.

Winifred turned to her mother who glared at the door through which Ransom had disappeared. "That man," her mother bit off with a frustrated growl.

"Mother, what's done is done. It would be bad form to reject his offer of hospitality."

The countess stared at her as though she had sprouted horns. "Bad form? My dear, are you at all aware of the state of your reputation? It will not be like it was before. It's quite irreparable, all because of that scoundrel in there," she said, pointing a vicious finger at the door.

Winifred knew this was inevitable, but she knew that now was the time to reveal herself. "I love him, mother," she whispered, almost afraid that voicing it would cause something terrible to befall her.

"Winnie, no," her mother whispered in shocked dismay. The misery in her eyes hurt Winifred. "Did you not learn from the last time? He is no different than before, love. You are merely dazzled by his good looks. Come," she said, taking her daughter's hand, "we shall return to our estate, and you will see that it's only some fantasy concocted by him."

Winifred pulled her hand from her mother's grasp. "No, mother. He has changed," she said, hoping to believe it herself. "Just stay for a few days, and you'll see that he does care for me."

Lady Samford gave her a contemplative look for a moment before releasing a soft, resigned sigh. "Very well, Winnie. But only for a few days."

\* \* \* \*

The evening came without another mention of the horrid scene on the front steps of the manor. However, there was one notable difference, and that was that no one had set eyes on Ransom since he left them that morning. Her mother grumbled at his insolence as they sat in the dining room awaiting his arrival.

Winifred wore an elegant gown of the palest pink, since her mother had brought some of her clothes. Adjusting the lace along her wrist, she glanced at her cousin who sat quietly beside her.

"I'm so happy you're here," she whispered to Cecilia.

Cecilia smiled, her brown eyes lighting behind her spectacles. "As am I. You must tell me what has happened. I knew you and Lord Leahaven would find a way."

Winifred glanced over her shoulder at the door as though the mere mention of his name would bring him into the room. "Whatever do you mean?" she asked.

Cecilia's gaze flicked around her before she settled on Winifred once more. "Well, your elopement, of course."

"Elopement? What the devil are you on about?"

Cecilia dropped her chin. "It's all that anyone talks about. It caused quite a stir in Town."

"I knew it," inserted Lady Maypin, her eyes aglitter with malicious glee. "Have you lost your mind, gel? Leaving in the middle of the night with that scoundrel. Did you not learn from the last time?"

Winifred's lips pursed as the sting of betrayal flayed her heart. Details of her humiliation had made its run of the gossip mill, and it was clear to her that her aunt felt an unseemly degree of glee over her brief, if hard, fall from grace. "I hardly believe I should be accountable for someone else's actions," she said stiffly.

Lady Maypin's eyes narrowed on her. "What are you implying? That you were taken here against your will?"

Thankfully Cecilia interceded, her arm hooked into Winifred's elbow in an almost protective manner. "Mother, we were invited. I hardly think it's as bad as you think. They are in love."

Lady Maypin glared at her daughter. "It shows how little you know. You, who have remained unmarried for five years. What do you know of love?"

Cecilia's chin wobbled, and Winifred glared at her Aunt, ashamed of her callous words that hurt her cousin so. It was badly done to air their dirty linen before guests and to make matters worse, the servants.

Winifred could do little more than bring her cousin closer to her side. "Cecilia knows plenty of love," she said defensively. "She overflows with it. That's why everyone loves her."

Lady Maypin eyed Winifred with icy contempt. "You *would* think that of my daughter. Her frivolous heart has caused me nothing but pain. While you ... you have disgraced the family for the last time."

Winifred recoiled at her harsh words. "I have done nothing to warrant such a charge."

"Nothing?" Lady Mapin sniffed. "Are you aware of the rumors that are running rife around London?"

"I have a fair idea," she returned coldly.

Her Aunt's eyes narrowed on her. "Do you, my dear? As I seem to recall, you failed to adhere to your father's superior knowledge when it came to rogues--and look where it ended for you. Shaming your family with your vulgar display of emotion before the *ton*.

"It's little wonder your father had to send you off to the country to save your reputation. And now look what you have done. You have left the Town in the middle of the Season, drawing attention to your foolish attachment to this Lord Leahaven and once again bringing shame to your family.

"There's been no word from you, and that vulgar Lady Neely is claiming an elopement. The *ton* is in a titter at this new scandal. Your father would be turning in his grave at this."

Winifred glared back at her Aunt while her mother remained silent. It was clear to her that her mother thought the same thing, as she made no move to halt the barrage of accusations.

She drew in a sharp breath and rose stiffly to her feet. "Come, Cel. I find that I have lost my appetite. The moon is out, and I'm quite certain Lord Leahaven's garden would look wonderful at this time."

She turned to the door to find Ransom standing beyond the threshold, his gaze hard and unfathomable. His attention moved from her to Lady Maypin, and if it were possible, his indigo eyes grew a shade darker. Beyond that, there was no indication whether he had heard what had passed between her and her aunt.

Then he approached them and held out his hand to her cousin. "Lady Cecilia. If you would allow me the honor."

Winifred's jaw dropped as he gave Lady Maypin an icy stare before turning his attention back to her cousin and drawing her to his side. Was it at all permissible to hand your guest a cut direct? Whether it was good *ton* or not mattered little as he moved away, unperturbed by Lady Maypin's offended gasps and stutters.

Winifred didn't wait to see if her mother approved as she followed after and drew in beside them. They stayed silent as they strolled outside. The silvery glow of the moon mixed with the warm light from the house lit the lawn. Crickets chirped joyously into the night; a soft breeze ruffled the branches in a soft nightly symphony.

"It's a beautiful night," Winifred commented, and for once was surprised that her fear of the dark had failed to emerge, allowing her to truly enjoy the evening.

"Indeed, it is," Cecilia said. "You were quite right, Winnie. The gardens look quite elegant in the light of the moon."

Winifred nodded. "There's a wondrous aroma that is carried by the breeze. I often leave my window open to it."

Her cousin giggled. "I could well imagine." She turned her attention to Leahaven. "My lord, thank you for your assistance. My mother does not mean what she says. She is merely concerned for me, that's all."

Winifred bit her tongue to stop herself from saying what she thought of her aunt, the harridan.

"It's my ... understanding ... that one ... should never ... berate in public," he rasped.

Cecilia remained quiet as though mulling over his words. It was clear to Winifred then that her cousin was truly disturbed by her mother's words. "Cel, you are a wonderful person, never doubt that. Your mother is jealous of your kindness and loving heart."

"Perhaps," her cousin mumbled, unconvinced. "Then why have I yet to find a suitor?"

"Do not despair, Cel. Your day shall come," she assured her. "There is a gentleman out there for you. He will appear when you least expect it."

"Like you and Lord Leahaven?"

Ransom turned to Winifred at her cousin's words, his gaze burning into her, his dark gaze unreadable in the darkness. "Yes," she whispered after a moment's hesitation.

His gaze remained on her for a moment more before he turned his attention back to her cousin and drew her attention to the row of roses they were passing. The

conversation continued on as though Winifred hadn't exposed her heart. Worrying her lower lip she glanced at Ransom whose attention remained fixated on her cousin.

A hollow feeling expanded in her chest. What was she doing? She had made a fool over herself once more. Her fickle heart had betrayed her. Beyond the intimacy they had shared, she remained confused about his feelings toward her. Was she merely a woman he wished to finally conquer only to find himself caught in the trap of ton speculation? Yet there was no explanation for his recently distant behavior that left her at odds between her heart and her need for self-preservation.

After the stroll in the garden, she had thought he would accompany them to the dining room, but he had merely bowed quite gracefully and placed a gentle kiss on her cousin's hand and hers, and then sauntered off as though nothing had shifted in their relationship.

She watched his retreating back with a heavy heart. He had proposed marriage. He had claimed her virginity, yet he remained distant. Even more so now than before. What was he playing at?

## Chapter Twenty One

Winifred woke with an uneasy feeling and frowned. Something was different about her room. She stared momentarily out the window at the full moon that shone a silver splinter of light into the room, then scanned the chamber.

There was no movement except the shadows that danced against the wall, and she ruled it down to silly childhood fear until there was a sudden shift in the air. A figure in the chair by her dresser moved, and she drew in a terrified gasp. Her voice choked from her in terror, and she scrambled back into her bed, the sheets clutched to her chest with white knuckles.

The figure moved and splinters of light washed over his features. Ransom. "What the devil are you doing in my room?" she hissed, relief washing over her and turning her knees to jelly.

He paused, his head tilting slightly to the side as though contemplating his answer. "I had to see you," he said slowly.

Winifred scowled at him, hardening her heart against him and his heated gaze. "Whatever for? You made yourself perfectly clear over the last few days. What more is there to say?"

"I don't ... understand."

"What is there to understand? You welcomed my family here to ease the rumors in Town that are condemning you. You needn't have offered for marriage to save my reputation. I shall be leaving tomorrow with my family, and you needn't worry about hearing from me again."

He approached the bed and paused at the foot of it. Her heart betrayed her as it took flight within her. She could *feel* his gaze rake her body rather than see it, a well of desire pooling within her as her traitorous body yearned for him. "Stop looking at me like that," she rasped.

He ignored her and edged along the side of the bed. His finger trailed along the mattress as she watched him with a cautious eye. He had yet to explain what he was doing in her room, and she remained in taut silence under his intense regard.

"Do you still believe that?" he asked.

"Believe what?"

"That you ... are a mere ... responsibility?"

Winifred blinked. "Well, of course. You have been acting most strangely since that night in the stable," she said as a heated wave ran across her cheeks.

"Strange?"

"Yes, strange. Ever since you showed me such exquisite pleasure, you have all but refused to touch me. You offer *reparation*," she said, spitting out the word distastefully. "But you have yet to give me the one thing I want."

He remained silent for a moment. "Your freedom?"

Winifred's heart dropped into a deep hole of cavernous despair. Freedom? Did he not know the depths to which she had foolishly invested herself? "Yes," she

whispered with a ragged breath.

The air in the room shifted at her agreement. His regard narrowed on her, and she shivered at the hard stare that pierced her, delving into her and trying to pull forth her vulnerability. She stiffened her jaw and tilted her chin stubbornly. She had revealed far too much and what had it gained her? Nothing.

He remained looming over her as though to intimidate her. She scrambled out of bed, refusing to look up at him like some disobedient child. Lighting a candle, she glared at him from across the bed, her hand wrapped over her chest in defiance. The light gave her confidence.

"What is it you want?" he rasped haltingly.

She lifted her chin higher. "I may not be as beautiful as the women you have paraded in the past, but I assure you I have more wit than they. But it's clear that it matters little. We are ill-matched, you see."

He frowned. "Is that what you believe?"

Long restrained insecurities surged and waned within her in a bid to release themselves from their tightly contained prison. A prison that had remained firmly looked for the last couple of years. Distracted, she turned from him and walked along the breadth of the room to stop before the full-length mirror. Her pallid, plain face stared back at her. No, she wasn't a beauty, but she possessed something that those women he paraded about before and after their short relationship five years ago didn't have. Integrity.

"It hardly matters," she said turning from the looking glass to stare at him. "What matters is this ridiculous agreement you think to forge with my mother. I will not marry you." *Not when you do not love me.*

"You will."

Winifred gasped. "I will not! How can you say that?"

"Because I want you."

"What? How can I believe you when you have been barely able to remain in the same room with me?"

"I want you," he repeated, taking a step forward. "I desire you," he stepped again. "I need you. I must have you." With every word he drew himself closer to her until he had her quite cornered.

Before she could move away, he drew her into his embrace and for the first time in as many days he kissed her. This wasn't a gentle kiss, or a kiss that showed his undying love. It was a fierce seduction of the mouth, mixed with fire, need, and hot passion as he searched her mouth with his tongue. The velvet smooth language he utilized with expertise urged her, pushed her for a response.

With a moan she wrapped her arms around his neck, knowing she had surrendered her soul, and released the last ounce of self-preservation to claim him. She opened to him as he arched her back, his mouth ravishing hers in a fierce battle for dominance.

He drew back from her, and she was unable to halt the whimper of disappointment that slipped past her lips. She didn't want him to stop, she wanted him to take her to heaven once more and damn the consequences.

With deft fingers he undid the buttons to her nightgown, and she shivered in anticipation as the cool night air touched her skin. Her nipples puckered under his regard.



With a growl he laved her body with his tongue, running a smooth line along the underside of her breast and along and around her areola. She gasped at the sensuous feelings that coiled within her, her hands clasp his head to her.

Her finger ran into puckered skin beneath his hairline and she frowned. The ball of her index finger trailed the scar that marked him. He drew back, taking her hand from his head, kissing each fingertip, the sapphire depths awash with insecurities.

"Don't hide from me," she whispered.

A small smile kicked up the side of his mouth, and he said no more as he eased the nightgown from her, leaving her naked before his eyes. "Never."

She drew him to her again for another kiss. He turned her in his embrace and kissed the column of her neck. She sighed and tilted her head back into his shoulder, and her hands rose to the back of his neck.

"Look," he whispered.

Winifred opened her eyes to find herself face to face with her own naked image in the mirror. The flushed cheeks and passion-filled eyes stabbed her with shame. When she would have drawn her arms down, he clasped them behind his neck, holding them in place.

"Do you see?" He kissed her collarbone and she shivered.

"See what?" she asked, her eyes slid shut, cutting off the wanton image of herself.

"You *are* beautiful," he rasped as he rained kisses down on her face.

"Don't," she moaned, not wanting him to continue this and ruin the moment.

His hands slid down her back and she arched. Her eyes remained firmly shut as she lost herself in sensations. Wood scraped against the floor, and she peeked out of the corner of her eye to find he had brought a chair toward them. Why?

His fingers glided along the back of her thigh, rising goose bumps along her skin. He moved around her and she was thankful that he covered her view of the mirror with his body, his indigo eyes aglitter with passion. "You should see yourself through my eyes," he whispered slowly before he took her mouth in his.

His tongue stroked hers and seduced her with careful practice. He pressed her back and the chair hit the back of her knees. "Sit," he rasped.

"What?"

"Sit."

Winifred eased into the seat behind her. The rough fabric of the seat added a new sensation against her bottom. Licking her lips she looked up at him to find his lips twist in a satisfied grin. Dropping to his knees, he kissed her collarbone and licked a trail down to her breasts. She tipped her head back and moaned in delight as he took one breast in his hand and teased it to aching awareness. He worshipped her breasts, alternating between soft suckles and raking of his teeth.

He grasped the back of her legs and pulled her toward him, before raising her legs over the arms of the chair, exposing her to him. Winifred gasped at such a scandalous position and pushed back, but his hands stayed her.

"Don't," he said. His intense gaze, dark as night, stilled her.

Winifred licked her lips. "It's scandalous."

"Delicious."

Her next retort was lost as his finger touched the aching point of her, between her legs. She stared at his half-closed lids, the way his lashes softly fanned his cheeks, the

hard planes of his face and taut set of his shoulders. His breath came in pants as he whisked his finger along the edge of her, and she was lost as the sensations fell upon her.

Liquid heat whirled within her as he seduced her with his finger, and then he did the most scandalous thing. He kissed her there. Winifred jerked, then melted against him and the soft delights he wrought on her body.

“Look,” he rasped.

Winifred opened her eyes and stared down at him, his face a mere inch from the center of her. “What?”

“See what I see. The mirror.”

Winifred glanced at the looking glass then immediately turned her gaze from it. “No.”

He licked her once, sending a shiver of delight through her. “Look,” he repeated.

Winifred swallowed and stared at herself in the mirror, and her passion-glazed eyes stared back at her. Then he pleased her, his mouth closed over the small hidden nub and suckled, eliciting a soft, delighted squeal from her. Her eyes drew shut, he pulled back, and she snapped them open again to find him regarding her. She knew what he wanted, and she returned her attention back to the mirror.

She moaned when he dropped his mouth over her sensitive flesh. His tongue rode the ridges of her nether region with such enthusiasm that she could do little but gasp. He continued his assault, and she rested her hands on the top of his head as he thrust his tongue inside her, whirling it around and coming out to only do it again. She drew him into her as she stared at the most erotic picture she had ever seen. My goodness! Her legs were splayed over the chair, and his dark head rested over the most private part of her.

She tipped her head back, and this time he didn't stop as he tasted her. He ran his finger along the edge of her lips and parted her for his eyes. “No, stop,” she whispered, mortified.

He ignored her as his tongue flicked over the aching point of her, and she jerked at the lightning bolt that ran through her like liquid silver. “Oh, God,” she murmured. “Do it again.”

He complied with enthusiasm, and she panted with uncontrollable mewls as he continued his onslaught. She rose up on a cloud of carnal pleasure, her legs parting all the more to accommodate him as he swirled his velvet tongue around the peaking tip of her. A new dimension to ecstasy was shown to her as his finger slid into her warm depths, withdrawing and gliding in a smooth rhythm that brought her close to the precipice. He held her suspended for a split second and then propelled her over as iridescent waves of ecstasy rolled through, over and around her. A high-pitched cry slipped passed her lips.

Ransom drew back from her, and she stared up at him in a daze. “My goodness,” she said. “Who would have thought such a thing was possible.”

He grinned. “I did. Many times.”

Winifred raised her arms behind the back of the chair, stretched like a lazy cat, and was pleased by the flare of desire that darkened his eyes. “Did you?”

“Indeed.”

“And what else?”

His eyes widened, but then he grinned devilishly as he pulled her to her feet. He

sat on the seat and pulled her onto his lap.

"Wha...." Her protest trailed off in a purr of delight as she found herself seated on his hard member with only a length of fabric separating them.

He grasped the back of her neck and drew her forward to take her mouth with his. Her hands rested on his shoulder as he kissed her and kissed her in a way that stole her breath. When they drew apart, they were both panting.

He slid lower in the seat, and she spread her palms against his chest, desire rekindling within her. Urgently she began to unbutton his shirt as he worked at the buttons to his breeches. Pulling his shirt off his chest, she ran her hands along his smooth pectorals and along his abdomen toward the patch of hair that crowned his member. He rose slightly in his seat and eased his pants down, setting it free.

Winifred stared in avid curiosity at the most male part of him. With a tender finger she touched the tip of it. When it jerked in response, she snatched her hand back.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No."

Hesitating for but a moment, she drew a long finger against his shaft, his groan delighting her. Growing bolder, she wrapped her fingers around him and rubbed up and down.

Ransom groaned as she pleased him. His fingers clenched against her hips, and his head dropped back, unable to watch her lest he come in her hand. He closed his eyes and floated in the pleasurable waves that coasted over him.

"Stop," he rasped finally, unable to take much more.

He jerked her hand from him and lifted her before he impaled her with his turgid member. My God, she was so tight and delightfully ready for him. He thrust into her, his teeth clenching as he attempted to regain control of his body, not wishing to shoot off like a bottle rocket.

Her breasts bounced deliciously before him as she rode him for all he was worth. Taking her glorious globes in his hand, he teased her nipples into pebbles. Unable to hold himself back, he reached between her legs and pleased her until she cried out in the throes of a climax, her back arched, her hands squeezing his shoulders as it took her.

Thrusting wildly into her, Ransom sought his release and drew her to him, her breasts muffling his groan as he spurted his seed into her. Small shudders ran through him from the aftermath of their passion, and he was loath to pull out of her. He wanted to stay in there forever.

"God," he mumbled. "That was...."

"Nice?" She asked, pulling back from him.

He chuckled. "Yes. But better," he said, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

She smiled shyly and dipped her chin. God, she was beautiful. He wanted to hold her like this forever. He sighed, knowing that he had to leave. Indeed, when he entered her room he had not planned on seduction. He had merely wanted to watch her sleep, much as he had done other nights. But he had made love to her, and once again he still had his clothes on. It would seem that he couldn't control himself around her.

"I have to leave," he whispered.

Winifred mewled in disappointment. "No. Stay with me."

He pressed a quick, chaste kiss on her lips before easing her off his lap. "I cannot."

Winifred wasn't swayed by his gruff tone and wrapped her arms around his neck as he stood, her pert breasts rubbing provocatively against his chest. He bit back a groan at the sensation.

"Stay," she whispered, her lids half lowered in a haze of desire.

"No," he ground out.

"Why not?" she asked, sounding like a child denied her toy.

"Because I won't be able to control myself."

"What does it matter? We are to be married. Besides, my reputation is ruined, and I would at least like it to be for a very"--she rubbed against him and he was unable to hold back a groan--"nice reason."

Ransom allowed her to kiss him, giving into his primal need to possess her. Damn the consequences.

\* \* \* \*

The following morning Ransom eased into the seat in the study and stared blankly at the sheets before him, a smile on his lips.

Last night had been one of the best times of his life. Twice he had almost confessed his love for her. What held him back he didn't know. Perhaps, the time was not right ... yet, somehow, that didn't ring true. He suspected it was something far simpler. Fear.

He had left her rumped in the sheets and thoroughly loved in the pre-dawn light and had yet to find his own bed for some much needed sleep. He rubbed his hand along his rough jawline and grimaced. He must look a mess.

The rumbling sound of an approaching carriage drew his attention, and he rose from his seat and strode toward the window. Who the devil was arriving at this time in the morning? He stared at the four fine steeds that drew an elegantly appointed carriage that looked familiar to him and set his teeth on edge. Lady Neely was arriving.

Damn it! This is not what he needed. Jerking against the lapels of his jacket, he turned from the window and strode out of the room. The butler eyed him and raced to open the door as Ransom continued without slowing his pace. He came to a halt on the drive and glowered at the carriage that rounded the bend and drew to a stop with a clatter of hoofs and jingling of chains.

Ransom stood his ground, refusing to open the carriage door, lest he throw the occupant from the carriage. A footman saved him from the decision as he scurried to open the door and handed down a very jubilant Lady Neely. Wearing a deep forest green gown and matching hat with a large white feather, she was the picture of sophistication.

Leahaven spoke without preamble. "What are you doing?"

Lady Neely looked at him as though she was vastly amused by his cold welcome. Ransom stifled a derisive snort. She was most probably so inclined. Indeed, she didn't even answer his question as she turned to the footmen unloading her luggage. Luggage? This boded ill for him, he was sure.

"Do be so kind as to deposit them inside," she said to the lads before she turned back to him. "Good morning to you too, Ransom."

He scowled at her pointed reference to his discourtesy. Be damned! He was in no mood to deal with her hints and artful candor. "What are you doing?" he repeated.

"Why, coming to stay, of course. You know, when Lady Samford and the Maypins left London so suddenly, I could only draw one conclusion--and here I am," she

said, waving about her to encompass the whole area. “*Tsk. Tsk.* And you didn’t invite me to this small gathering.”

Ransom didn’t answer immediately as the footmen dragged her luggage into the manor. “You aren’t staying.”

Her hand fluttered to her chest in mock offence. “Why ever not? Surely you cannot be fearful of what I might say to our dear Winnie.”

“You said enough.”

Lady Neely blinked, the smile leaving her lips. “Well, I never. Had I wished, mending fences with her might have been easier for you.”

“Elopement?” he bit off, still baffled by her audacious lie.

She chuckled. “It’s the first thing that I could come up with.”

“A lie.”

Lady Neely’s hands dropped on her hips. “What would you have me say? That you kidnapped her in the middle of the night in an attempt to save her life? Come now, that is far less believable than the *truth* I concocted.”

Ransom drew in a steadying breath. This was a disaster. “You are not staying.”

“Of course I am,” she said and stepped past him and strode into the manor. “Do be so kind as to direct these footmen to my room.”

It took but a moment for Ransom to re-gather his wits as he followed after her to find her perusing the hall. “Hmm, a vast improvement since I was last here,” she said with an approving nod. “Though I do believe these tapestries have to go.”

Ransom couldn’t believe it. The audacity, the nerve of her. He clenched his fists. He had paid back his debt to her, so why the devil wasn’t he throwing her out on her ear?

She turned and strode over to the French doors that led into the assembly room. “I see you still have that ugly cabinet blocking the door,” she said with a note of irritation. “It’s a shame really. Such a lovely room.”

“Be damned,” he muttered.

She turned toward him, a brow raised in amusement. “Is it not about time you vanquished the ghost?”

Ransom’s jaw clenched in an effort to hold back the rise of rage that stirred beneath the surface. Since the arrival of Winifred to the estate, he had not once pondered what lay beyond that room. Yet now he was unable to even look at the door.

“Don’t,” he warned, his lips barely moving to utter the word.

Lady Neely ignored him. “It’s but a room. What is there to be afraid of?”

Ransom jerked his gaze from the floor to glare at her. What was there? Surely she wasn’t serious. His father hanged himself in that bloody room, and she knew it.

She turned to stare at the doors for a moment, then shrugged before she returned her attention to him. “You will have to open that room up eventually. Winifred will want it so.”

Ransom’s jaw clenched in an effort to control his raging emotions. He didn’t have to stand here and listen to her.

“It serves little as a shrine to his death,” she said softly.

It wasn’t a damned shrine to his father’s death. It was a cold reminder of the day when his life began to unravel around him. If his father hadn’t been such an ass and gambled it all away only to kill himself, Ransom wouldn’t have been faced with the desperation that eventually led him on his own destructive path--and left him with this

disability.

Ransom glared at her, and in a surge of black energy he strode past her toward the cabinet that barely concealed the double French doors. Hooking his hand behind it, with a hard heave, he tipped the old wooden cabinet forward and stepped back as it crashed with a resounding boom against the floor.

Lady Neely's squeal of surprise was lost on him as he stared at the damage he had created.

"Now see," she said after a moment. "Does that not make you feel better?"

Ransom glowered at her smug look, her previous surprise masked by her hauteur.

"Come now, don't look at me like that. I am not at all perturbed by your show of pique, though quite a savage display, I would say it was liberating.

"You know, it was really an odd blessing in disguise, if you think of it. If it weren't for the debts your father accumulated, you would not have been so desperate to court Winifred in order to win that wager with Anterton."

Ransom glowered. "Not for money." Though it was uncouth of him, he knew the reason he continued pursuing her was quite simply for her. He and his old comrades were the only ones that knew that.

Lady Neely shrugged. "It's all the same really. Have some fun, have a lark."

"No. It was hell." If it weren't for the wager, then he wouldn't have spent five years living in torment, aching for Winifred.

Movement from the corner of his eyes caught her attention and he jerked his head in that direction to find Winifred standing several feet from them, a hand to the base of her throat. The misery and disbelief that whirled in the blue-green depths were enough to send a rusty knife through his heart. She had heard about the wager that drew him in her path.

## Chapter Twenty Two

"Win...." He started toward her, but she stepped back, a glaze of tears filming her eyes before she whirled from them and ran from the manor.

"Oh, dear," Lady Neely murmured, and Ransom shot her a scathing stare before chasing after Winifred, who was running across the lawn.

He sprinted after her, quickly eating up the distance between them until he grabbed her arm and pulled her to a halt. She turned on him, and her hand seared his cheek, knocking his head to the side.

"You bastard," she hissed. Tears welled in her eyes and tumbled forth. "So it *is* true. I didn't want to believe that you did it just to hurt me. Please, please tell me it wasn't so, that you felt something for me back then."

Ransom's heart ached at the desperation that laced her voice, and the ounce of hope that glimmered in her gaze, but he was unable to respond. His throat had closed up around him.

Winifred's mouth parted. Her lower lip trembled, and she covered her face with hands and sobbed into them. "Oh, my God. Father was right."

Ransom drew her forward into his embrace, but she pushed from him, stumbling back. "How could you do this to me?" she asked, pointing an accusing finger at him. "You used me! You ... you ruined me! Oh, my God, how could I have been so foolish."

Ransom was at a loss for words as he watched with a breaking heart as the love of the woman he cherished withered before his eyes. "My feelings...." The words lodged in his throat.

Her hand pressed against her chest, over her heart, as she stared at him in earnest. "I thought you were genuine back then in your feeling back then and now. I thought I meant something to you."

"You do."

"How can you say that? You have never once told me that you loved me."

Ransom wanted to draw her in his arms. *I do love you!* He wanted to scream. *Does it matter what happened then? What matters is right now and how I feel. I feel the same for you as I did then, never doubt it.* But those words were lost to him as he stood at odds with himself as Winifred crumbled before him.

"From the first moment I met you, you planned to humiliate me. Why?"

"I didn't."

"Don't lie to me! That's all you have ever done. For once in your life, tell me the truth."

Ransom stared at her as the tears ran down her cheeks. What could he tell her that wouldn't be perceived as cruelty? Would she even believe him? "I wanted to ... marry you."

"I told you not to lie to me!"

He grasped her hands, but she pulled them from him. "Believe me."

"How can I when you ... when you hurled rotten fruit at me!" She drew in a harsh

breath, her eyes flashing with fury. “*Rotten* fruit! You vile beast. But that wasn’t enough, you had to denounce me before the *ton*. Like the coward you are, you couldn’t admit to your fault.”

“I did it--”

“Ha!”

“--for you,” he finished.

“Are you mad? For me? You humiliated me and broke my heart for my benefit? You *are* mad.” When she would have moved off, he grasped her wrist but she jerked it from him, her scathing stare burned into him. “Don’t you dare touch me.”

“Would you have...,”--Ransom paused as she began to walk off and he gripped her arm at the elbow--“...married a pauper?”

She glared up at him, her lips set in a fine line of rage.

“Would you have been happy?” His fingers tightened on her arm. “Would you?”

“What does it matter?”

“It matters.”

“If I loved him, then I would have been happy living in a hovel.”

“I don’t ... believe you,” he rasped.

Winifred jerked her arm from him again. “I hardly care whether you do or do not. I am going home. You needn’t worry about my reputation,” she hissed. “I would rather face a life in social exile than marry you.”

She turned to storm away from him, but Ransom refused to allow it to end this way. Following after her, he grasped her around the shoulders and whirled her around. “You want truth?”

Before she could answer, he slammed his lips down on hers, a kiss infused with all his emotions and unbridled desperation. Her lips were stiff against his, and he seduced her with his tongue, urging her without words to let him in.

He closed his hand around the back of her neck, cupping her, stilling her for his invasion. Her closed fists lashed out at him and punched at his shoulders, but he steadfastly ignored it.

With determination he seduced her with his mouth. Her lip parted a fraction, and he took immediate advantage and stroked the sleek warmth within.

Her fists unclenched, and her soft moan was caught in his mouth as she yielded to his demand. Her tongue joined in a dance of desire that lit the flames within him.

He eased the pressure behind her head and ran a smooth hand down her back. His hand grasped her round buttock and gave it a gentle squeeze. He wanted her. He needed to take her to her bedchamber and possess her, but he drew his raging emotions to a halt and pulled back.

She looked up at him with half closed eyes, her lips swollen from his kiss.

Ransom released her. “We shall marry. Put this ... behind us.”

She blinked slowly, then her soft smile died from her lips as ice began to harden her gaze. “No,” she said emphatically. “We shall not.”

Ransom grinned, unmoved by her denial. It would do her little good as he knew the extent of her desire for him. “You will. You love me.”

Her cheeks reddened delightfully as she sputtered in offence. “I most certainly do not! I cannot control what my body does, and I can tell you now, my lord, my body does not mean my heart.”



He merely chuckled at her words, prompting a frustrated growl from her.

"I am not going to marry you, my lord. I am leaving. Today. Good day to you," she said with a disdainful sniff and strode past him. This time he didn't stop her.

Ransom leaned against the oak tree to watch her make her way back to the house, her grumbles prompting a smile to pull at his lips. He would ensure she wouldn't leave his estate if he had to chain her to his bed. Indeed, he had every confidence she would return to his bed before the week was out. No, he would wait for her to see sense.

If all else failed then he would kidnap her. Again. Yes, that thought did hold some merit.

A loud crack of gunfire sliced the air, breaking into Ransom's ruminations. He watched in horror as Winifred stumbled back and hit the ground.

"Win!" He ran as fast as he could toward her, a sick lump settling in his stomach as he approached. He skidded to a halt beside her and drew up her shoulders on his lap. "Oh God. Oh God," he muttered staring at the growing pool of crimson that stained her torso. Pressing into the wound, tears began to gather behind his eyes. She couldn't be dead. God, she couldn't be.

The warmth of her blood congealed over his fingers, the iron aroma of blood sending images through his mind that he longed to keep at bay. When he applied more pressure, she groaned softly, and relief that washed over his body.

Her lashes fluttered against her pallid cheeks and opened. "Ransom?"

"Here, love."

"It hurts," she groaned.

"I know." Glancing about him to ensure the shooter wasn't around, he scooped her up in his arms. Her moan stabbed at his heart. "Be still," he whispered.

For every step he took, he felt her stiffen in his arms, her grimace adding to his need for urgency as he hurried back to the manor. The butler's eyes widened at the sight of Lady Winifred bleeding in his arms.

"Get a physician," Ransom ordered and hurried to the drawing room, laying her down upon the settee.

On his knees he drew off his coat and jerked off his cravat. He ripped his shirt from his back, the buttons popping off in his haste. Tearing the fine fabric, he made quick work of constructing bandages, then began to unbutton her gown.

"Stop," she whispered, her eyes barely opened.

"I must stop the bleeding," he said without pausing. Her chemise was soaked with her blood, and Ransom pressed his makeshift bandage on the wound that puckered her shoulder. She moaned at the contact.

He heard the sound of scurrying footsteps and turned to find all his current guests had entered the room--including Lady Neely.

"What are you doing without a shirt? Oh, my God!" Lady Samford cried. "What have you done to my daughter!"

Had Ransom not been so worried he might have taken offence. "Nothing. She was shot."

"Shot?" At that moment Lady Maypin promptly fainted and hit the floor with a thud.

Cecilia was instantly at her mother's side, tapping her hand in an attempt to bring her back to consciousness.

"Have you sent for a physician?" Lady Neely asked.

"Yes."

"How could Winifred been shot?" the countess demanded, her accusing gaze directed at him.

Ransom sighed. "I want to marry her. Not shoot her." He turned back to look at Winifred's pale features. Her eyelashes fluttered slightly. She wasn't unconscious, but not fully aware either. Perhaps that was a good thing.

"Is it fatal?" Lady Neely asked.

Ransom sighed and stared at the wound. "Don't know."

Lady Samford collapsed to the floor, her chest heaving in gasps of panic as her hand covered her mouth. "Oh my God. How could this have happened? How could this have happened?" she wailed.

Ransom dipped his head. Yes, how indeed.

\* \* \* \*

Winifred was burning up. Her body ached all over. Her shoulder felt as though someone had stabbed her with a burning prong and had forgotten to take it out. She lay on a bed of flames that licked at her skin and found herself unable to focus on anything.

A fiery hand touched her, and she jerked from it with a hoarse cry. But she was drawn up slightly and a cool glass touched her lips. Water. Sensuous water dripped into her mouth as she swallowed, her dry throat screaming in protest, but her body eagerly accepting the reprieve from the heat. Then all too soon, the cup was removed from her and she groaned in protest.

"Soon," he whispered. That soft, smooth voice soothed her in her dreams as she slipped back into oblivion.

\* \* \* \*

She woke again to find herself in hell. Lucifer stood before a burning, cavernous opening that took up the expanse of one side of the stone room. His head was bent forward as though he was in contemplation. His great coat concealed his hoofed feet and large body in a shroud of darkness that seemed at odds with the light that filtered into the room.

Flames licked along the edge of the opening as amber light flickered over the gray walls. The wails of the tormented sent a shiver of fear through her.

As though sensing her movement, he turned. His red eyes, burning in the shadows of his hood, stabbed into her and sent a cold shot of terror through her. She tried to move, but she was held down by the mere strength of his gaze.

He approached the bed and she whimpered. She was in purgatory for indulging in the needs of the flesh. For loving Ransom.

"How are you feeling?" His voice rumbled through her and hurt her ears as she flinched.

She licked her dry lips. "On fire," she rasped.

He leaned over, his dark features obscured by the hood he wore, but she knew it was the Devil himself. The horns that rose over the hood were a clear indication as to whom she conversed with. His hand rose and she flinched from it, but he gave no indication if she offended him as he rested it on her forehead. She cried out in relief, amazed that he would have hands as cold as ice.

"How is it so?" she murmured.

"How is what so?" he asked.

Winifred hesitated. Dare she refuse to answer the Prince of Darkness? "That your hands are so cold."

He chuckled. Indeed, it was not how she expected Satan to sound. A maniacal, devious laugh, but not amused by her honesty. "Perhaps ... the room. It's cold."

Winifred shook her head. No, the room was sweltering. How could he say that. "Am I in purgatory?" she whispered, fearful of what his answer may be.

He remained silent for a moment. "No," he rasped fiercely.

At the anger in his tone Winifred couldn't help but smile. "Then I am going to heaven?"

"No."

"But you said I wasn't in purgatory. Am I in hell then?"

"Do you deserve ... to go hell?"

Winifred shivered. He would know she lied if she tried to do so. "Perhaps," she said evasively.

"What for?"

What for? Lucifer didn't know her downfall? "For lust," she whispered, ashamed. "But I love him. So truly, it should not be that terrible of a sin."

He chuckled at her answer. "It's no sin. To lust."

Winifred blinked. Of course it was a sin. "It's a sin. It's in the bible not to lay with a man outside wedlock, and I have done so. I have sinned terribly."

"So contrite," he whispered as though amazed by it.

"I am. I don't wish to go to hell."

"You won't ... go to hell."

Winifred nodded but she dared not to believe the Prince of Lies.

"You ... don't believe me?" He seemed amused by it.

"You are the Prince of Lies. I would be a fool to believe you."

He nodded slowly. "I regret that."

Winifred frowned at his candidness. Lucifer wanted redemption. "But you are the Devil."

"I have been ... called *a* devil. Not *the* devil."

"But then who are you?"

He stared at her for a moment. She could feel his gaze burn into her. "Sleep," he whispered.

Winifred watched him move to seat himself before the fire that burned at the end of the room. "Are you going to be here when I wake again?"

"Perhaps."

Winifred shivered. She didn't want to be in hell.

## Chapter Twenty Three

The soft cracking embers broke into her consciousness, and Winifred groaned, opening one eye to find herself safe in her bed. Goodness, what a dream.

Movement caught her eye, and she found Cecilia sitting before the hearth, embroidering something. Her hand felt weighted, but she raised it a fraction off the bed. It was enough to draw her cousin's attention. Her brown eyes lit up behind her spectacles, and she dropped her needlework as she approached the bed. "Thank God, you are finally awake," she cried as she threw herself bodily at Winifred.

Biting back a cry of pain, she patted Cecilia with an arm that didn't feel battered. Her cousin drew back, a film of tears gathered in her eyes. "My goodness, look at me. I am ever so relieved."

"Water."

"Oh, yes. How silly of me." Cecilia moved to the bedside table and filled up a glass with water before sliding up the bed and assisting Win into a seated position. After a moment of plumping up the pillows behind her, she helped Winifred drink from the cup.

She was allowed several sips before the glass was set to the side. Sighing, Winifred leant back on the pillows and closed her eyes.

"You know, Lord Leahaven didn't leave your side once until yesterday afternoon. He was quite exhausted and collapsed in your mother's arms."

Winifred frowned and glanced at her cousin. "How long have I been unconscious?"

"Four days."

Four days! It felt as though she had only closed her eyes.

"We have been quite worried about you. Lord Leahaven did not trust anybody with your care, so it's little wonder he ran himself ragged."

Winifred sighed and leant back on the pillows, her ruminations turned inward. He hadn't left her side once. The thought filled her with an odd sense of comfort and blooming hope that she thought she'd lost. But the question now was who was trying to kill her? Tears of fear and frustration pricked the back of her eyes. She attempted to pull herself under control and focused on her cousin as she rattled on about her mother's recent fits.

"Mother is insistent that we remove you from the estate. That it is bad for your health due to you being shot and all, but Lord Leahaven absolutely refused." Cecilia giggled. "You should have seen mother. Positively red in the face from his insults. Nobody dared do that before. Of course, she didn't take too kindly to his impoliteness. He sent all of our footmen to the village and also Lady Neely's entourage. Mother positively hit the roof."

"Did they find out who shot me?"

The exuberant glitter in Cecilia's eyes dulled, and she adjusted her glasses. "Uh, no. We don't know who it was or whether it was an accident or not."

"Cel, I've had several attempts on my life over the past month or so, and it's the first time this person has managed to injure me. How long am I to wait until he succeeds in what he wants to do?"

"But why would someone wish to hurt you?"

"Yes. Why, indeed?"

\* \* \* \*

Winifred woke as the orange hues of dusk settled over her bed. The curtains were pulled wide to allow the maximum amount of light in. From the corner of her eye she noticed that Lady Maypin was in the room, her features set in a hard line.

"I see you have finally awoken," her aunt said coldly.

Winifred swallowed and drew the sheets up to her chin. The shadows on her aunt's face reminded her much of her father. "What is it?"

"What is it? Are you aware that your lover has fired all my staff?"

"No. Cecilia said that he sent them to the village."

Lady Maypin sniffed with disdain. "Cecilia wouldn't know a thing even if it was written out for her and stamped on her forehead."

"That's not very nice, my lady. Cecilia is a smart young lady and what is more, your daughter. You should be honored that she's such a loving person. Besides, you are surely exaggerating. Lord Leahaven doesn't have the authority to fire your staff."

Her aunt's eyes narrowed. "I see the injury didn't take away your sharp tongue."

"It wasn't my head that was injured, but my shoulder. Indeed, it would seem that my accident has left you without grace."

Lady Maypin's lips pursed as though she'd bitten into a lemon. "There is a reason you two are unwed. It's your sharp tongue and Cecilia's ridiculous view on marriage. It's a wonder why your father didn't disown you like he should have when your *elopement* failed. You brought shame on the family and still have a life befitting a Marquis' daughter, while I..." She paused and drew in a steady breath. "I want my staff back to pack my things. Come tomorrow we are leaving."

Winifred held back the smug smile that rose to her lips. "Well, then I shall miss you."

"What are you talking about? We, the whole family, are returning to the Samford estate. There is little reason for you to stay here."

"I am injured. Has that escaped your knowledge or do you not care?"

Lady Maypin looked at her down her nose. "I am well aware of the current predicament you are in, but it's no reason for you to stay here and breed more scandal."

"Lord Leahaven and I are to be married. We are quite within the bounds of decorum."

"Foolish girl, you think that man loves you? You are a mere responsibility."

She refused to allow her aunt's words to affect her. "If that is so, then I hardly see that it is a matter of yours."

Lady Maypin recoiled. "I am merely looking out for you, my dear."

"Like you do with Cecilia? If that is the case, then I do thank you, but no thank you."

Her aunt's face turned livid as she stood, her eyes flashing with fury. "I am ashamed to admit that we are related by blood. Your actions would have your father turning in his grave. You will have an unhappy marriage. Mark my words."

With that, she whirled away and stormed from the room, the door slamming with a resounding thud. She stared at the door with a mixture of frustration, hurt and puzzlement. Why was her aunt so hysterical? Nothing in her life was easy, and Winifred was overwhelmed by the great pit of despair that solidified in her stomach and expanded painfully. Tears pricked the back of her eyes, and she drew her hands up and cried out her fear and frustration.

Strong arms circled her, and she looked up at Ransom. Relief suffused her body, and she drew her arms around him, resting her cheek against his solid shoulder.

"What has upset you?" he asked, his breath warming her ear.

"Nothing," she whispered, holding him all the more to herself. "I am relieved I am alive."

"So am I."

She removed her arms and eased from his embrace, her eyes moving over his features. Though cleanly shaven, the strain of the last few days was written on his face, the darkness around his red-rimmed eyes and the heavy set of his lips.

"You stayed with me through my illness?"

His gaze dropped for a fraction before he looked up again. "I had to."

"Why?"

"I didn't want ... I didn't. I can't lose you."

Winifred's gaze softened. "You won't. I shan't leave you ever again."

A frown furrowed his brow as he stared at her, uncomprehending.

"I love you, Ransom. I always have," she said in earnest. "It's time I put the past behind me and live for today and the rest of our lives."

Ransom's mouth opened, and his adam's apple bobbed furiously, yet he said nothing and drew her into a hard embrace, raining kisses over her face. His lips devoured hers, and Winifred yielded to him. Her tongue waltzed with his, and her hands threaded into his hair as liquid desire pooled within her.

All too soon he pulled back, his sapphire gaze aglitter with repressed passion. "Not now," he rasped.

Winifred pouted, her hands massaging the back of his head, holding him under her spell as his lids drooped. "Why not?"

He leaned forward and kissed her again, a quick sweep of his tongue was all he allowed her and he pulled back. "You're injured."

"It's only my shoulder," she said, lifting one shoulder in a shrug. "I am perfectly able to attend to the task."

He chuckled. "I don't doubt it."

"Then why? Am I not attractive enough for you?" she asked with a mischievous tilt to her lips.

He drew her into his embrace. "Never say that."

"Then stay the night with me."

His smile was soft and indulgent. "No. You need rest."

Winifred sighed and rested her head on his shoulder. "Very well. But I shan't forgive you."

"You will."

She ceded to his point and smiled. "I know, but it doesn't hurt for me to be a little mad at you."

"No?"

"No. All you need do is to kiss me, and I may consider forgiving you."

He smiled, and his mouth closed over hers once more in a soft, gentle kiss. When she attempted to deepen it, he groaned and opened to her. A blossom of satisfaction opened within her heart. His invasion was fierce and passionate. His hands wrapped against the back of her head, spreading through her hair.

Her hands rested over his chest, feeling the erratic patter of his heart against her palm, and she moaned with the satisfaction of knowing she affected him so. He leaned forward, and she didn't protest as her head fell back on her pillows. His warm palm cradled her breast, and she purred in delight.

Slipping her hand behind his back, she eased her fingers under the fabric and glided a smooth hand against his back, the muscles jerking at the contact. Her other hand moved down to his waist, squeezing him encouragingly.

She wanted this.

He pulled back a fraction and trailed kisses along her jawline and along the column of her neck. Her head tilted back to accommodate him. His hand trailed along the curve of her breast, and she arched her back with a groan of delight.

He pulled back, his gaze heavy-lidded, his breath coming out in rough pants.

"Don't stop," she murmured, bringing her hand behind his neck to pull him close, but he resisted.

"I must," he rasped.

"I won't mind."

He chuckled, though it sounded a bit strained. "But I would. I want to marry you. The next time. I have you."

Though she ached in places she never knew before and yearned to yield to his body, she ceded to him and sighed. "Very well. I expect an expedient wedding."

He smiled. "Your wish. Is my command."

Winifred smiled. Indeed, her future was looking better already.

\* \* \* \*

The following evening Winifred's acceptance of Ransom's desire for abstinence only lasted so long, and she ached to be with him. With a determined set to her lips, she set out to seduce him, but it did her little good when he only saw her when she had someone else in the room with her.

Indeed, she didn't question his need to possess her. The smoldering looks they gave each other were enough to keep those doubts at bay.

Rising from her bed, she repressed a groan as pain seared along her shoulder and down her arm. Creeping to the side door, she opened the door and slid into the room. The chamber was still of all movement, and her disappointment grew when she found the bed empty.

With a sigh of frustration, she turned to the window and peered outside to find a flaring light within the stables. With a small squeal of delight she returned to her room and lighted a candle before exiting the room. She scurried down the steps and opened the manor door, her hand shadowing the tender flame, protecting it from the wind.

With a smile of anticipation, she hurried up the lawn, her attention focused on the opening to the stable. As she rounded the corner she entered the stable and pulled to a halt as confusion grew within her.

The stable was quiet save for the horses that nickered at her arrival. It remained still with no indication of having been used recently. She turned a full circle but found nothing out of the ordinary and no indication that the stable was occupied at any time tonight.

"Well, well, this makes my job easier."

Winifred gasped and whirled about to find herself face to face with the Maypin footman, Geeves.

"Oh," she said, her hand fluttering to her chest. "You gave me quite a scare. What are you doing here? I thought Lord Leahaven sent you all to the village."

His cold smile that sent a frisson of fear through her. "He did. But you see, I have job to attend to."

Winifred frowned. "I'm sorry. I don't understand."

His expression grew grim, and it was then that she noticed he wielded a vicious looking dagger. Her eyes rounded with understanding, and she whirled and sprinted for the manor.

Behind her she could hear the sound of heavy footfalls, and with energy fueled by fear, she pumped her arms in an attempt to outrun him.

A heavy hand fell on her shoulder and she cried out, her scream of terror echoing against the night sky. Twisting in his grasp she turned and stumbled back, hitting the soft earth heavily. His body fell on hers, and a blade caught the dim light of the moon and glittered as it made its descent.

With instinct born of fear, her hands clasped around his wrist, halting his descent for a fraction, her shoulder screaming painfully at the exertion. Gasping, tears of terror leaked from her eyes into her hair as she pushed against his wrist.

"Please," she cried. "Please stop! Don't do this!"

His face was a mask of pure menace. His dark eyes glimmered with devilish intent as he pushed against her. Feeling her strength begin to fade, she sobbed against the futility of it, and at the last moment she released his hand. Her head moved as the blade stabbed into the earth a mere inch from her head. Her knee lashed out and she managed to make a solid connection. A gush of air ripped from his lungs, and he rolled off her with a cry of pain.

Grabbing the knife, she was on her feet in an instant, sprinting for the manor, but he had recovered before she had a chance to make it to the door. His hand wrapped around her hair and pulled viciously. The sting of pain was lost on her. She stumbled back and hit the gravel drive, and her elbows scrapped against the rocks. The knife slipped from her grasp and slid against the drive.

With a cry of fury, she rolled to her feet and threw herself at him, her hands forming claws as she scraped at his face. He pushed her back and threw her to the ground.

"You little bitch," he growled, his hand working at his belt.

Taking his distraction as a moment of opportunity, she lurched to her feet and ran into the manor. Her scream echoed in the hall, and she turned into the first room available.

Slamming the double doors shut, she held the handle as she heard the footsteps approach. The door handle rattled, and she sobbed against the wood. Her fingers tightened against the cool iron, the sweat of her hands making the knobs slick.



"Let me in you bitch," he snarled through the door. "Or I'll make it slow and painful."

He threw his weight against the door, which jolted against her. The creaking of the wood told her that she wouldn't be able to hold him at bay for long. The door jerked further and further inward with each impact, and she knew that he would burst into the room shortly despite her efforts.

She stumbled back when the door finally gave away under the strain, and she hit the hard wooden floor with a thud. He was on her in an instant. His hands wrapped around her neck, cutting off her scream, and she gagged against the pressure.

Determined, she grasped at his fingers to no avail, her eyes fixed on the look of glee that entered his eyes. She was going to die.

Her lungs screamed for air, as he pressed the life out of her. Her vision swam, and she writhed beneath him, her strength ebbing as the clarity of death hit her.

One moment he was there, then the next he was gone. Coughing at the strain as air hit her lungs, she rolled over and sobbed her relief. Ransom had Geeves straddled, his fists rising and falling indiscriminately.

The grunts of effort continued as her killer fought. They rolled along the ground, neither one giving up as they struggled for the upper hand.

Finally, Ransom had him pinned, the furious raise of his fists continued until his opponent fell into unconsciousness. Yet when the beating continued, Winifred stumbled to her feet and drew her arms around his shoulders pulling him back.

"Stop. He's unconscious," she croaked.

Ransom pushed off the man, his hot angry gaze burning into him. His features twisted into an expression of pure hatred. With a final insult, Ransom spat on Geeves and drew Winifred into his arms.

"My God," he whispered and took her mouth in his in a fierce kiss.

"What the devil is going on?" Lady Samford screeched.

Winifred drew back to find her mother, cousin, aunt, and friend filling the doorway to the great Assembly room. "Mr. Geeves was trying to kill me," she said.

Lady Maypin elbowed her way into the room, a cry of dismay slipping past her lips when she saw her motionless footman on the floor. Stumbling over to him, she sobbed in hysterics as she drew his head onto her lap. "Geeves, my love, it's I. Oh my God," her tear-filled eyes glared at Winifred. "How could you do this to him? How could you?"

Winifred's eyes widened at her aunt's display. Her mouth dropped open, yet no words came out. Her cousin, however managed to piece a few words together.

"Mother, what is going on?"

Lady Maypin's scathing stare turned on her daughter. "Your cousin ruined him!"

Cecilia glanced at Winifred then back at her mother. "He was trying to kill Winifred. Didn't you hear that?"

"Of course I heard it," she snapped.

"But ... but don't you care?"

Lady Maypin drew in a ragged breath, her eyes lit with a maniacal gleam. "No, I do not. Who do you think ordered him to do it? That's right. I did."

Winifred swayed against Ransom, unable to fully comprehend that Geeves hadn't acted alone. That her own aunt wished her dead.

Cecilia's hand rose to her mouth. "But why?"

"Why? You have been nothing but a thorn in my side since the time of your conception. Demanding everything of me. But I thought after your first Season you would find a husband and plague him with your presence.

"But your needless hunt for *love* destroyed that. You have destroyed our finances. You and your frivolous father. Had you married like a good little girl, I wouldn't have needed Winifred's inheritance."

"But you are my mother!" Cecilia cried, a sob of despair passing her lips.

"Oh, spare me the dramatics," Lady Maypin hissed, her lips set in a cruel line. "We are paupers. We don't even have two ha' pennies to rub together. We are one step from debtor's prison, and you cry over a little honesty?"

"It's time you grew up and faced the facts. No one loves you. Oh, your father might have, but you have been nothing but a royal pain since the day I birthed you."

Cecilia crumpled to the floor, and Winifred was instantly at her side, wrapping her up in a comforting embrace. "She is just distraught," Winifred reasoned. "She knows not what she says."

Cecilia clung to her, the grip of her hand on her upper arm biting into her. "Yes she does," she whispered with a ragged breath.

Winifred's heart broke at her cousin's despair. All her life she had watched Lady Maypin treat her daughter with disdain and put her down, and now she knew the extent a mother could needlessly resent her own child.

Lady Samford approached the group, her eyes burning with fury. "You ordered the death of my daughter and insulted my dear niece. You are nothing but a spineless harpy, and I shall see you in prison."

Lady Maypin chuckled, a cold derisive sound. "Oh, spare me. It's a shame the truth can hurt at times. But she will be stronger for it, knowing her shortcomings."

"You are mad," Lady Samford whispered.

"Am I? Perhaps, but at least my daughter is not some dirty little hussy that will spread her legs for a little attention."

Before anyone could even react, Lady Samford launched herself at her sister-in-law and clawed at her face. The two women rolled about on the floor as they screeched out obscenities and the resounding slaps of open palms broke the air.

"Do something," Winifred demanded to Ransom.

He merely crossed his arms. "In a bit."

Finally after a moment, he strode over and extracted Lady Samford from her husband's sister, his cold stare holding Lady Maypin at bay. "Take your lover and go."

She glared at him for a full minute, before she pushed to her feet. Her gaze fell on everyone within the room. She straightened her shoulders and realizing she had no allies there she left the room, leaving her lover behind.

Lady Samford watched her go with a malicious gleam. Blood leaked from the side of her mouth and she touched it with a hiss. "I never liked her," she stated matter-of-factly.

Winifred eased her arms from Cecilia, whose sobs had become uncontrollable hiccups. "There, there, Cel. It will be all right. You'll see."

"I am poor," Cecilia cried. "My mother hates me and tried to kill you. How can I live with myself knowing that?"

Winifred drew her forward. "It matters little what your mother did. You are not responsible for her actions. She will answer for her crimes. She is not a reflection of you. You are a your own self, and what I see is beautiful."

"But I'm going to prison."

Winifred shook her head. "No, I shall do everything in my power to stop that from happening. You have me to look after you now."

She glanced over her shoulder at Ransom to find him regarding her strangely. What had she said?

## Chapter Twenty Four

Winifred lay in bed with Ransom, her head resting against his bare chest, his hand running a smooth trail up and down her arm. For the first time in her life she was content--and very much in love with her husband.

The revelations over the last few weeks had left her with a sense of wholeness, and she was finally able to let go of the ghosts of her past. She had allowed herself to love again, and that was the most blessed feeling in the world.

"Why were you looking at me so strangely that night in the Assembly room?" she asked, finally voicing a question that had been bothering her.

"Because you were right."

"Right? About what?"

"The past. My family."

She remained silent, absorbing what he said. "You hold yourself accountable for your father's actions?"

"Sometimes."

"What your father did was a horrible thing. It was horribly tragic, but you are alive and managed to turn all your woes around. You have surmounted all your problems, and you should be very proud of yourself."

Both his arms wrapped around her in a soft embrace. "What of you?"

Winifred sighed. She knew what he referred to and had never bothered to ponder it for extended periods lest she become depressed. She indeed had much to be grateful for. While her father had been incredibly harsh, she knew deep down in his heart he loved her and sought to seek her safety.

Indeed, her aunt had proved to be the enigma in the family. Lady Maypin had been stripped of her title, and both she and her footman had been deported to Australia shortly after a trial. Although Cecilia was shattered to see her mother go, Winifred had every confidence that she would recover.

"Do you think that she'll be the same after this?" she asked.

Ransom's hand stilled on her. "No."

Winifred leaned up and stared into her dear husband's face. "Why not? She has such a wonderful heart, and mother is taking wonderful care of her. Why, she is treating her like a second daughter."

"It's not ... the same. You and I. We have changed."

Winifred's lips settled in a wry lie. "Well, yes, but mostly we are the same too."

"But different."

"Very well. But do you think she will be able to find love after she has seen what it has cost her?"

Ransom's lips twisted in a smug, knowing grin. "Yes."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because of us."

Winifred sighed and settled her head on his shoulder. Her mind ran over the

revelations since their marriage. "I cannot believe you allowed Anterton to talk you into such a juvenile act," she said, ignoring the tensing of his body.

"It was ... badly done."

Winifred nodded. "Had you listened to Lord Carlyle, perhaps you would have been able to avoid the disaster of following Lord Anterton."

"Anterton led ... me to you."

She remained silent as she absorbed that bit of detail. It was indeed true. Had it not been for the wager, would he have even looked twice in her direction? Perhaps not.

"I don't believe that you would have ever noticed me had it not been for that atrocious bet."

"I would've noticed."

"Would you have? I was quite voluptuous you know, and only pursued by fortune hunters."

"Exactly so."

Winifred squealed and swatted him on the shoulder. He chuckled and rolled her over, trapping her beneath him.

"Either way, we could have been happily married a long time ago," she said with a nod.

"Would we have?"

"Yes, indeed. I was so in love with you then, had you told me the truth, I don't think I truly would have cared. At least I would have been happy."

He kissed the tip of her nose and drew her into his body a bit more. "I love you," he croaked.

Winifred lifted her head again to look into eyes that sparkled with the true depth of his love. "I love you, too. Now tell me, dearest love, what say you to another proposal?"

"What proposal?"

"I propose that we concentrate on having a baby by the time the year is out."

He grinned and rocked against her, her soft moan of delight caught by his mouth. "How can I"--he kissed her--"refuse?"

The End