



# DIVINE DEVIL

By

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## Chapter One

Sebastian Stockbridge, Viscount Huntington, was in his study going over the accounts and nursing a touch of hangover when his butler scratched lightly at his door. "Come," he called absently.

The butler entered and hovered.

Sebastian looked up at last. "What is it, Meeks?"

"There is a Mr. George Winston, Esquire who requests an audience, my lord."

Sebastian frowned. "A solicitor? He's not one my solicitors, is he?"

"No, my lord."

Sebastian thought it over. "Did I seem excessively intoxicated to you when I came in last night, Meeks?"

"Not excessively, my lord, no."

"Did I appear to be laboring under any sort of distress?"

Comprehension dawned. "I'm certain this has nothing to do with your evening, my lord."

Relief flickered over Sebastian's face. "In that case, you may show him in."

The butler bowed. "Very good, my lord. Where should I put the--uh--females?"

Sebastian stared at his butler blankly. "Did you mention females?"

Meeks cleared his throat uncomfortably. "I may have failed to mention that the solicitor arrived with two females."

Sebastian studied the butler uneasily. "This is very bad news, isn't it Meeks?"

"As to that, my lord, I couldn't say. Mr. Winston did mention that his business had to do with a will, my lord."

"A will," Sebastian echoed blankly. "And he brought two females with him? How old?"

The butler thought it over. "A young lady and a woman I presume to be her companion or governess."

Sebastian sighed irritably, but it was obvious the only way to get to the bottom of the mystery was to speak to the solicitor. Finally, he waved the butler off. "You can seat the child and her nanny in the parlor--and have some refreshment brought. And escort Mr. ---uh--whatever the hell his name was in here."

The butler bowed again. "I already took the liberty of showing them into the parlor and ordering refreshment. I will fetch Mr. Winston."

Mr. Winston, it transpired, was a stout, elderly barrister, and it seemed that it was he who was laboring under some sort of distress. Despite his attempt to behave with all dignity, Sebastian couldn't help but notice the man was visibly shaken when he entered the study, sweating profusely despite the chill of the season and looked more than a little relieved that Lord Huntington had agreed to see him. He took the hand Sebastian held out in both of his and wrung it for a good few minutes before he seemed to collect himself and released it, looking around for a seat.

“How may I help you?” Sebastian asked politely once he had seated himself, although the sense of impending disaster that he’d felt from the moment Meeks mentioned the visitor had only grown deeper when the man had appeared.

Mr. Winston allowed a faint smile. “I’ve come on my client’s behalf, Lord Dermot Marshall.”

Sebastian’s brows rose. “Dermot? Good, God! He is barely three and thirty, if that much, for he and I were at Cambridge together and I am only a couple of years younger than he. You’re not saying--?”

Mr. Winston looked suitably solemn for one bearing bad tidings. “Alas, we fear so. As you may or may not have known, Lord Marshall took it into his head to go off adventuring in the wilds of the colonies about eighteen months ago. He has not been in communication with us in almost a year--he was in the uncharted territories when last he sent word to us--and despite every effort, we’ve had no luck in tracking him down.”

Sebastian rose abruptly and paced to the hearth, fiddling unnecessarily with the fire poker while he collected his thoughts. He hadn’t seen Dermot in nigh two years, but they had been the best of friends since their school days together--or so he had thought. He had certainly not heard that Dermot had taken it in his head to go off to the Americas, though--not that he could recall. “And you fear foul play?” he asked slowly.

“The possibility exists, but from what he wrote, the territories are fairly wild--anything, or even nothing, may have happened. All that I can say for certain is that sufficient time has passed with no word that I felt that I must implement his wishes.”

Sebastian turned to look at the man in surprise. “His last will and testament? Surely you are being precipitate in executing his will when you’ve no solid evidence that he is--that anything has happened?”

Mr. Winston looked uncomfortable. “It’s not--precisely his will--but his affairs must be put in order. I feel confident that I, and my partners, can continue to handle his financial affairs and his estate. It is his orphaned child who requires--uh--parental care.”

Sebastian felt his jaw sag in stunned disbelief. “His child? I didn’t even know he had wed!”

Mr. Winston reddened. “Well, my lord, as to that, he didn’t. The girl is a--uh--legacy of a youthful indiscretion. But when the girl’s mother died some years ago, he took her in to rear her himself and had the paperwork done up so that if he did not wed and produce an heir, she would inherit. The thing is,” he added quickly, “he held you in the highest regard. And he has requested that guardianship of his daughter pass to you in the event that he is not here to fulfill his parental obligations and see her suitably settled.”

“I see,” Sebastian said tightly, setting the poker down and moving back to his seat behind his desk. “If that isn’t just like Der,” he muttered. “Running off and leaving someone else to deal with his mess!”

Mr. Winston blinked, paling noticeably. “I beg your pardon, my lord, but Miss Kathryn is a lovely young lady....”

Sebastian cut the barrister off with a sharp motion of his hand. “She may well be, Mr. Winston, but as it happens, I am not wed--I’ve no desire to do so simply to provide the chit with a home and, I don’t mind telling you my reputation isn’t the best. I’m not only ill suited for the role of guardian, I am not prepared ... Even if I wished to be, which I don’t mind telling you, I don’t.”

The solicitor's shoulders slumped. He shook his head sadly. "I feared as much. Poor child."

Sebastian stared at the man uncomfortably. "She has other relatives...?"

Mr. Winston shook his head sadly. "Nay. Not a one. A few distant cousins on her father's side, but ...." He shrugged. "They were not best pleased that he took the girl in and made her his heir. I hated to turn her over to them ...."

Sebastian frowned. "Where has she been staying all this time?"

"At Lord Marshall's country estate, but you must see as well as I do that that simply will not do at all--to leave her there with no one but Miss Shirley and a gaggle of servants? I would take her in myself, but my wife and I are very old to be trotting after a young girl."

Sebastian sighed irritably, but he realized he was lost. He would have to do something for Dermot's child. He couldn't simply turn his back on her.

Perhaps, he thought a little hopefully, he could convince one of his sisters to take her in? Fanny was good hearted, and a very motherly sort.

She had a half dozen girls of her own, though, and the eldest just out this year. She would not be thrilled to take another under her wing when she already had her hands full.

Amelia he dismissed. He wouldn't wish her on his worst enemy. He couldn't in good conscience push the child off with a cold fish like that.

He shook the thoughts off. He was certain something would come to him. Sighing, he stood. "Dermot was a dear friend. I will do what I can for his child."

Mr. Winston beamed at him, sitting forward in his chair. "You will? Oh! That would be splendid! Splendid! I have the paperwork right here if I could just take a few more moments of your time to go over it?"

Sebastian frowned, feeling a faint uneasiness that the man had brought the papers with him when he had seemed to expect a rejection of the plan. If he had, then the only explanation for bringing the papers that presented itself to Sebastian was desperation, which was almost a more unnerving thought than the suspicion that he had been manipulated into taking the girl.

He glanced over the papers, casting his mind back to his visits to Dermot's estate. Vaguely, he recalled a few glimpses of a fair haired child with huge blue eyes, usually peering in through some doorway and taking flight if anyone glanced her way. If he'd given it a thought at all, he supposed he'd assumed the child belonged to one of Dermot's servants--for that matter the child he'd glimpsed might have, but if it had been Dermot's girl then she was very quiet and shy, which he found a considerable relief.

He hadn't thought to ask the solicitor how old the child was, but Dermot was only a few years older than he was. It seemed unlikely she could be more than eight or possibly ten, even considering the comment about the youthful indiscretion.

That would put her around the age of Fanny's middle girl--not that he'd spent a great deal of time around his nieces, but he felt a little relieved nevertheless. He could cart her off to a boarding school--and then a finishing school. By the time she emerged, he would have nothing to do but arrange a marriage for her and everything would be neatly taken care of--assuming Dermot didn't return in the meanwhile--which he might.

Assuring himself the papers were in order, he signed them, waved them around until the ink dried while the solicitor made an abortive attempt to snatch them from his hand and finally handed them over.

Mr. Winston breathed a sigh of relief, shoved the papers into his satchel and leapt to his feet. "Well, my lord, I won't take up any more of your time. I'm sure the girl will be quite well taken care of. Good day!"

Frowning, Sebastian studied the solicitor's hasty retreat to the door of the study. "Perhaps you should introduce me to the child before you go? She does not know me, after all. This must all be --unnerving for a youngster."

Mr. Winston either did not hear, or pretended he didn't. Snatching the door open, he charged down the hallway and out the front door without a backward glance.

Sebastian stared at the vibrating door with a nearly overwhelming sense of uneasiness and finally strode down the hall to the front parlor. As he opened the door, an attractive woman who appeared to be in her mid to late thirties, glanced up from a book she had been reading. "You must be Lord Huntington?"

The child was seated in a chair with her back to the door. His first inkling that he might have miscalculated her age was when she stood up. She was not tall, but too tall, he felt certain for a child of eight or ten. Twelve, he hazarded?

She turned around.

A shock wave seemed to roll over him, completely stunning him. The first thing that captured his gaze was the bountiful breasts that seemed in imminent danger of spilling from her décolleté. It was not only the first thing that caught his gaze, it was the only thing that snagged his gaze for many moments--He wasn't certain how many, but he was finally brought to realize that a pregnant silence had fallen over the room.

With an effort, he dragged his gaze from the most beautiful and impressive pair of breasts he'd seen in many years--possibly ever--and met the nymph's limpid blue gaze.

She was blushing, which tinted her flawless, alabaster skin a lovely shade of peaches and cream. Her eyes, huge and brilliantly blue, and surrounded by thick sooty lashes, fluttered. Disconcertingly, his putter, too stunned to react before, responded with delighted interest.

Clearing his throat, he shoved his hands into his breeches pockets and moved to the hearth, putting his back to the room while he gritted his teeth and willed his response away. Deciding he had himself under control after a few moments, he turned at last.

She looked like an angel. He simply couldn't get around the fact that she was shaped like a temptress and looked like an angel.

And she was not--definitely not--a child.

He nodded, clearing his throat again. "You must be ... uh ...." He frowned. Had the damned man told him the girl's--young woman's--name? Or had his wits totally deserted him?

She smiled and his heart seemed to stop in his chest. "I'm Kathryn--Kathryn Marshall, my lord. And this is my companion, Miss Lynnette Shirley."

## Chapter Two

Kathryn felt faint. It had taken all she could do even to pretend to be casual and pleasant.

Sebastian looked exactly the way she remembered--tall, heartstoppingly handsome, dashing. She'd more than half feared her girlish fantasies about Lord Huntington had been enhanced by her daydreaming--and night dreaming if it came to that, for she had been wildly in love with him since she was barely fourteen and he had come for a visit to Elk Park, her father's country estate.

And when she had finally nerved herself to take a peek at him, he had been looking at her just the way she'd always pictured he would look at her one day, as if he thought she was the most beautiful and desirable woman he'd ever seen.

It had taken a good deal of prodding to convince Mr. Winston to bring her to Lord Huntington in London, but it had been well worth the months of determined prodding.

She could hardly believe that after all these years, her plan was coming together.

It was such a pity Dermot would not be here to see her when she had her come out and then caught the most eligible bachelor in England--She knew Sebastian had to be, for he was by far the most handsome man she knew besides being a lord and very well set up.

Of course, he was considered to be a bit of a rake, and she supposed some might object to that, but she found that dangerous air he had about him quite exciting. In any case, Dermot had been a rake and she couldn't see the harm in it, when all was said and done. That was certain to change once he fell madly in love with her.

Almost in a dream like state, she held out her hand. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate you taking me in like this, my lord. It is so dreadful about poor Dermot!"

Sebastian blinked several times as that comment sank in. Slowly, he felt his color heighten. He cleared his throat, stared at her extended hand for several moments and kept his own hands firmly in his pockets.

"Dermot?" he finally managed.

She looked conscience stricken. "I shouldn't call him that? He didn't want me to call him papa, you must know. He said it made him feel quite old, and he still preferred to think of himself as a randy young buck."

That artless comment caused Sebastian the second wave of shock in less than five minutes. He looked her up and down, which was a mistake, he realized belatedly, because he hadn't imagined that she was built like a goddess and the dress she was wearing firmly attested to that fact.

It was the height of fashion--which was to say virtually transparent. It was as well for him that she hadn't discovered--yet--that the more daring young women often dampened their underskirts so that the gowns clung to their figure. He wasn't certain his heart could take any more. "Exactly how old are you?" he asked a little hoarsely.

She beamed at him. "Eighteen. I should have had my coming out last year, but Dermot--I mean Papa was in the Americas ...."

Sebastian frowned, trying to do the math, but discovered that was beyond him at the moment. "Eighteen!" he echoed, aghast. "Eighteen?"

She chuckled. Like the rest of her, the chuckle was far more pleasing to his senses that it should have been. "Dermot was fifteen. He has always been very pleased with himself over it--forever bragging to any who would listen. My mother was his youngest sister's governess, poor little thing. She died, you know, when she was just a little thing--his younger sister, I mean--but I think the family had already sent my mother away before that," she said frankly.

Sebastian glanced at the clock on the mantel. It was scarcely noon, but he decided the hell with it. He needed a drink--badly.

He looked around a little vaguely, but his butler did not magically appear. Striding to the bell pull, he reached for it and then dismissed it, snatching the door open and bellowing down the hall for Meeks. Since Meeks was directly outside the door--either listening or on the point of entering, his ordinarily small eyes widened considerably. "You called, my lord?" he asked with unruffled dignity.

"There you are! You must send someone to ready rooms for my--uh--ward and Miss--uh...."

"Shirley."

Sebastian glanced toward the woman who'd spoken, but her expression was still very agreeable. "Miss Shirley."

"I took the liberty of doing so already, my lord."

Sebastian's eyes narrowed as they settled on the butler once more.

"I'm sure the ladies are quite worn out from traveling and would like to go up to their rooms and freshen up, and perhaps rest a bit before luncheon. Cook relays her apologies. Luncheon will be delayed."

"Thank you, Meeks. I assume you've already seen to moving their luggage in, as well?" he asked, his voice somewhat brittle.

Meeks nodded. "Certainly, my lord. I have put Miss Marshall in the blue room," he added significantly.

Sebastian stared at the butler suspiciously for several moments, but finally decided the comment wasn't a direct insult to his integrity. It was a relief, actually, to know Meeks had had the foresight to put her at the opposite end of the house from him.

Not that that was really necessary.

He couldn't stay here--not in the same house.

No one who was not blind, deaf, and dumb would believe for one moment that he, who was not quite a notorious rake but didn't miss it by far, would be able to keep his hands to himself with a chit like that right under him.

He wished he hadn't thought of it quite that way, because thinking of her under him was precisely the reason he was so rattled.

Moreover, he didn't believe it, which was exactly why he wouldn't be staying.

He glanced at the goddess Aphrodite. "I hope you will excuse me. I have--urgent business which I must attend to."

Disappointment filled Kathryn as she watched Lord Sebastian stride from the room and disappear. The front door had already closed behind him when she brought her attention back to the butler. After casting an uncertain glance at Lynnette, she followed the man upstairs.



Lynnette, trailing them, observed as they made their way through the rambling manse. "A very grand stair, Mr. Meeks--and such marvelous workmanship. Do look at the birds and flowers carved into the spindles, my dear. Aren't they lovely? And so detailed! I couldn't help but notice that all of the doors, and of course the stairs, are quite wide. This mansion must date back to the days of panniers?"

Mr. Meeks threw a glance at her as he reached the upper landing. "I couldn't say, Miss. Quite possibly you are right. The house was built by the old Viscount--Lord Sebastian's grandfather. Part of it burned at one point--one of the London fires--but it was restored."

"Ah!" Lynnette observed, smiling. "Did I not say so? Such a pity carpenters don't take this much pride in their work anymore--Do look at the chandelier, my dear. I imagine we won't be stumbling around in the dark as we were at Elk Park!"

"All the wainscoting, Mr. Meeks," she added, including him in her discussion. "Quite lovely, really, but so dark one could not find enough candles to keep the place illuminated in the evenings. I have often observed that it must be much like living in a cave--particularly since, in the winter, gales blow through the old place--I give you my word, gales! It's nigh impossible to keep the candles lit."

Mr. Meeks gave her a condescending look as he paused at a door along the corridor. "We have gaslights, Miss Shirley, in most of the public rooms and many of the bed chambers, as well."

"You don't say!" Lynnette exclaimed. "So modern! I do feel uneasy about the gas, though."

Meeks managed a thin smile. "We are very careful, Miss Shirley. You need have no fears there." He transferred his attention to Kathryn as he opened the door. "This will be the blue room, Miss Kathryn. I trust you will be comfortable here?"

Kathryn glanced into the room. "Where will Lynnette be?"

"Just there, Miss Kathryn," he replied, pointing to the next door down. "I thought, you being a stranger to the place, that you would be more comfortable with Miss Shirley close by and the old house is quite empty now. Lord Huntington lives here alone so all of the bed chambers, save his, are available."

Relieved, Kathryn followed him inside and smiled politely as he pointed out the room's amenities. When he'd left again, she settled in a chair beside the hearth, warming her toes and trying to chase the chill of her cool welcome.

She found it impossible to dismiss the impression that Lord Huntington was less than thrilled to find himself in the position of her guardian. She supposed she should not have expected anything else. Dermot had not been very happy when she had come to live with him either, despite the fact that it was he who had tracked her down and taken her to Elk Park.

She supposed it was for much the same reason--a great desire to have no more responsibility than absolutely necessary and the uneasy feeling that she would be a bother, particularly since he was accustomed to doing pretty much as he pleased.

She stiffened her spine. She and Dermot had learned to rub along quite well together. She was certain, if he would only give her a chance, she could prove to Lord Huntington that she would not be a burden to him either--perhaps not an asset, but not an encumbrance.

She was very independent and quite capable of taking care of herself. She had been no more than five when she had gone to live at Elk Park, if that much, and she had managed well enough until he had hired Lynette.

In fact, she had managed completely on her own for several months between the time of her mother's death and the time that Dermot had sent someone to find her. She was very resourceful.

She had not seen so much as a spark of recognition when Sebastian had looked at her, she realized suddenly. She had been so awed by him, she had not been in any state to notice his reaction at the time--except that she had thought that he found her attractive. Now, she realized she had misread everything. He had not been stunned to see she was all grown up into a woman because he hadn't remembered the child she had been. He had just been stunned--probably at the magnitude of the responsibility he had accepted.

That didn't make sense either, though.

Until she recalled his question about Dermot.

He had thought she was a child, she realized suddenly! When he had agreed to accept guardianship, it was because his friendship with Dermot had made him feel an obligation to his child and when he realized that she wasn't a child at all, he had rushed out.

He had probably hurried off to find stuffy old Mr. Winston about the papers!

She surged out of the chair at that and began to pace the room, but she was too agitated to think. After a few moments, she left the room and tapped on Lynette's door.

To her relief, Lynette opened it. "Why--child! You look as if you've seen a ghost. What is the matter?"

Kathryn felt her chin wobble at the sympathy on the other woman's face. "I think he means to send me away."

## Chapter Three

“Nonsense!” Lynette said bracingly, grasping Kathryn’s hand and urging her into the room. “I’ll have none of that silliness! I have always told you that tears are a useless self-indulgence. They solve nothing. They only make you appear weak to others, and they will always look for weakness to use against you.”

Kathryn swallowed with an effort, nodding. She knew Lynette was right. Ordinarily, she did not have so much trouble controlling her wayward emotions. She supposed she had been so certain of Lord Sebastian’s support that it had only made the fall that much harder.

“He thought that I was a child when he agreed to take me in. He has gone to find Mr. Winston and tear up the papers.”

Lynette pushed her into a chair and studied her, her arms crossed over her narrow chest. “You have been told this?”

Kathryn sniffed. “No,” she said slowly.

Lynette pursed her lips. “Then you do not know anything. You have only allowed your imagination to upset you!” She settled on the bench that sat in front of her dressing table. “I was there, as well, let me remind you. And unlike you, I was not so smitten with Lord Huntington that I could not observe without prejudice.

“He was greatly surprised, I will grant you that, but he was certainly not immune to your pretty face, my dear. I could see that he thought you were quite lovely.”

Kathryn reddened. “He hardly looked above my bosom, Lynette! I should be surprised if he recognized my face if I passed him in a crowd!”

Lynette chuckled. “You are not complaining!”

Kathryn studied her hands. It wasn’t that she minded being considered desirable--if that truly was the case and it wasn’t merely that he was so stunned by the freakishness of her bosom that his manners had abandoned him, and she wasn’t convinced that the former was true. In fact, she was miserably certain that the latter was exactly what it had been--not desire, but simply shock.

“I think that he does not want me here at all and he will send me packing,” she said finally, unwilling to confess her infatuation even with Lynette, with whom she generally shared everything. Lynette was very practical minded, however, and she would have denounced such a confession as the silly fantasies of a child, not the reasonable expectations of a woman.

“We will cross that bridge if and when we come to it, my dear. In the meanwhile, I am not at all displeased. You need not tell me, or dispute, that you have set your heart on wedding Lord Sebastian. I know you well, so you need not deny it!”

Kathryn felt blood flood her cheeks again and then drain almost as rapidly. “It is not that obvious?”

Lynette chuckled and leaned forward to pat Kathryn’s hand. “Only to me, and only because I love you as a daughter and know you better than anyone else.”

“I think I should like to have him as a husband,” Kathryn admitted tentatively.

“Exactly as I thought!” Lynette exclaimed, smiling knowingly at Kathryn. “And I can not say that I find fault in your choice--he is a most handsome man! But you must know that he is quite handsome enough to turn many girls’ heads, and I make no doubt that there are many trying most earnestly to capture his interest. You have the advantage though, for we will be right under his roof!”

Maybe, Kathryn thought, still far from convinced that she would not find herself in a coach headed back to Elk Park by the morning.

“If I may say so, however, you have not really done much--shopping. If one snaps up the first thing that catches the eye, its almost inevitable that one will regret it, for there is always something a little more intriguing if one looks.”

Kathryn studied Lynette a little doubtfully, tempted again to explain that she was madly in love with Sebastian. It seemed to her that she always had been. She did think that he was handsome. She knew that he must be a wonderful lover, for when he had visited Elk Park, all the ladies had very nearly fought over who would be his companion--and that could not have been for any other reason except his prowess as a lover when marriage was not a possibility and neither his wealth or title would be theirs.

Besides, she had seen him and it had thrilled her no end just watching. She hadn’t felt anything like that when she had watched the others--and there had been many, for her father quite often entertained his friends at Elk Park. In fact, she had found it mildly revolting to watch some of them.

She knew better than to flatly veto Lynette’s suggestion, however.

Lynette studied her knowingly. “It can not be any other way, you know, my dear,” she said gently. “You have come to London for your coming out and you must make a push to appear eager for it. Lord Huntington will certainly send you packing if he realizes that you came only to try to rope him into marriage. Men must be brought to arrive at this conclusion themselves, that it is their idea and something that they want, else they are dead set against it. First, you must tease him into desiring you, and then you must flirt madly with every other eligible bachelor. When he begins to realize that someone else may snatch you up, then he will begin to think that he is not nearly as happy being a bachelor as he believed.”

Relief flooded Kathryn. “You think so?”

“Of course! You are no great beauty, my dear, but you are certainly not an eye sore and your father has settled a handsome sum on you--besides the fact that you will be his heiress if he does not return, which will be a great draw I don’t mind telling you. I am confident Dermot will return in his own good time, but in the meanwhile, you will be considered his heiress and that is all that is really important.”

Kathryn tried not to look as dismayed as she felt. It was almost worse to think the men would be hanging after her for Dermot’s money than to think they would see nothing beyond her bosom. “Don’t--don’t men ever fall in love?” she asked doubtfully.

Lynette gave her a look. “They fall in lust, my dear, which I suppose to them is much the same thing--either with your face and figure, or your purse. You must consider yourself fortunate that you are a very attractive package. As you know, a woman without a dowry is of no interest at all, and one with a small dowry will almost always find her choices very limited.”

She paused, seeming hesitant to continue. “Alas, your antecedents are not the best, dear Kathryn. Not that your mother wasn’t well born enough to suit the most

discriminating, but the circumstances of her death--you must expect that you will be snubbed by some, but you must keep your chin up and refuse to allow that to bother you."

Kathryn nodded. With an effort, she suppressed the anger and sadness that always welled inside her when she thought about the mother she could barely remember, particularly when her mother's character was brought into question. "It was not her fault," she said finally, unable to resist the need to defend her mother.

Lynette grasped her hand and squeezed it. "You do not have to convince me, dearest. There but for the grace of God go I, for I haven't a farthing to my name! Others may not be kind, however."

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There were very few members in the club with the exception of the older men when Sebastian arrived, but that suited his mood perfectly. He was not currently desirous of company of any kind.

Not surprisingly, he had not been able to lay hands upon Mr. Winston, for that gentleman had doubtless not slowed his pace since he had rushed out and was likely well on his way home by now.

It was just as well, Sebastian had decided morosely. He might have been tempted to do something he would later have regretted.

Besides, the chit's age changed nothing, really--not so far as his obligations, anyway. His comfort was totally destroyed. His life was now in shambles, but he still could not have turned Dermot's only child away. She was alone in the world. With Dermot out of the picture, someone had to see that she was properly settled.

He realized that he should be relieved that this was a task that he could dispatch quite readily instead of something he would need to dread for years. He still had not convinced himself of that, however, after near half a bottle of fine brandy.

Dismissing it for the moment, he focused on the logistics of the 'problem'.

He needed a female relative to handle the affair. It would not do for him to even attempt it, even if he felt confident that he could--which he didn't.

Try though he might, however, he simply could not manage to dredge up some long lost female relative that would do the trick.

He had one choice, Amelia.

In a general way, he might be insensitive to the needs of others, but Fanny already had her hands full. She was good hearted enough he didn't doubt that he could cozen her into taking the chit on, but he just wasn't comfortable with the thought of adding more to her plate.

Amelia was a widow and childless.

It had been his experience that she was also an incredible snob, and a coldhearted, selfish bitch. As gentle and shy as poor little Kat was, his sister would very likely crush her spirit, but for the life of him he could not come up with an alternative shy of rushing into marriage himself. And he wasn't about to do that, not for the sake of his friendship with Dermot and not for Dermot's daughter.

Seeing no hope for it, he left the club to try to track down Amelia and see if he could persuade her to take the chit under her heartless wing.

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Sebastian didn't know whether to be more annoyed, more embarrassed, or more disconcerted when the ladies arrived in the salon for dinner and he saw that Kat had been completely aware that he had not been able to keep his eyes, or his mind, off of her bosom. She was swathed in a shawl when she arrived, which he thought little of at first. When she removed it, however, he saw that she had tucked a scarf into the neck of the gown that covered her from chin to neckline.

He immediately felt like an old lecher--which was a severe blow to his ego--but he was also embarrassed and contrite that he'd frightened the girl by drooling down her bosom. Unfortunately, he could think of no way at all to smooth the matter over other than to ignore her attire.

Alas, her companion was not of a like mind and he began to suspect that the social grace of the 'blind eye' was not something she was familiar with.

When he glanced guiltily at the woman seated beside her on the sofa, he saw that she was giving Kat a disapproving look. "That scarf does not go with the gown at all, my dear."

Kathryn reddened and clutched the scarf more tightly to her throat, smoothing it absently. "I thought the color matched quite well," she said stiffly.

"I was not speaking of the color," Miss Shirley said primly. "Lord Huntington will think you a country bumpkin with no notion of style or elegance."

Sebastian had been thoroughly captured and distracted by the movement of Kathryn's hand, but at that comment penetrated his absorption and irritation surfaced. He frowned at the woman. "You must not bring me in to your disapproval, Miss Shirley. I've no knowledge of lady's fashions, but I can not help but think Kat is lovely, whatever she wears, and feel certain that all of London will agree."

"That is very kind of you," Miss Shirley responded approvingly before Kathryn could say anything.

It was just as well. 'Kat' could think of nothing to say. She supposed it was silly to be so pleased that he had used a diminutive to refer to her, but Dermot had always called her Kat as a sign of affection when he was feeling particularly fond of her. He had never, in fact, called her Kathryn unless he was scolding and, consequently, she was not terribly fond of being called Kathryn.

It pleased her all the more that he had defended her against Lynette's scolding and complimented her. "Thank you, my lord," she managed to stammer belatedly, knowing Lynette would be scolding her over her poor manners next.

Sebastian studied her with a touch of surprise and finally smiled at her encouragingly. He still found it more than a little unnerving to look directly at her, but it was actually a relief to realize that he had not misjudged her by her face. Obviously, she was as innocent and unspoiled as she appeared to be if she could be thrown into such adorable confusion by such a paltry compliment. "I think I will be disappointed when you grow so accustomed to compliments that that poor effort pleases you so," he said teasingly.

Settling himself in a chair across from the two women, he wrestled with his news for several moments, trying to decide how to put the best light on it.

Not that he thought Kathryn would find it unwelcome, at least not until she had had the opportunity to experience life with his dragon of a sister, but he thought it might make her a little easier in her mind if she knew he meant to take his role as her guardian

seriously. He might be a rake, but despoiling innocents was not something he had ever done. Admittedly, it was probably the only thing he had never been guilty of--mostly because very young, ignorant, cringing virgins annoyed the hell out of him and he far preferred women with enough experience that they had some notion of how to please him. Nevertheless, he was not completely incorrigible and he wanted to reassure Kathryn that she need not worry that he would take advantage of the situation and try to force his unwanted attentions upon her--however hungrily he had looked her over before.

"As for fashion--I have spoken with my sister, Amelia, and she was delighted at the prospect of taking you under her wing," he lied baldly, firmly pushing his uncomfortable visit with his 'dear' sister to the back of his mind. "I assure you, she travels in the highest circles. She has graciously agreed to stay with us until we have you comfortably settled. She will see to it that you are properly attired for every conceivable occasion and that you go to all the right parties."

Kathryn glanced at Lynette and then at Lord Huntington again. "Lynette will not be with me?"

"Don't be a goose, Kathryn! You will not need me trailing behind you! And it would not be at all the thing. I am so pleased for you! You are bound to have a splendid time with Lord Huntington's sister chaperoning you."

## Chapter Four

"I was neither hurt nor insulted," Lynette said firmly and with determined patience.

Kathryn studied Lynette carefully, but she wasn't convinced. "I will not have you treated as if you are no more than a--a servant!"

Lynette smiled and patted Kathryn's hand. "I am a servant, Kathryn. I have been in service for many years. I'll admit that I was not very happy about the necessity of it when I was young, but I am quite accustomed to it now. You must stop worrying that I am being mistreated. Lord Huntington is quite right. A servant is simply not adequate chaperonage. I am very pleased to see that he is so considerate of your reputation, my dear. Dermot was quite right to choose him as your guardian, for I can see he means to do right by you."

Kathryn looked doubtful. "Why do you suppose I am to go to visit his sister tomorrow? He said that she would be moving in. If that is the case, why would I need to go visit her first?"

"I expect she wants to approve you first--before she commits herself to the task," Lynette said after thinking it over.

Kathryn looked at her companion indignantly. "Do you think so?"

"I'm sure that must be it."

"Then I am very sure that I shan't like her!"

Lynette studied her in dismay. "Now, Kathryn, you will not set out to dislike her, will you? I'm certain Lord Huntington will be very disappointed if he finds that he has gone to all this trouble for your benefit and you prove difficult."

"I do not care to be judged," Kathryn said irritably. "Perhaps she won't like me. In fact, I think she has set out to dislike me else why would she have to look me over and decide whether she approves or not before she will even agree to chaperone me?"

Lynette sighed. "She must be a stickler for correct behavior, my dear. It is not likely that she will lend you countenance if she is not. And it is perfectly reasonable, if that is the case, for her to wish to be certain that you are presentable. You have nothing to worry about, I'm sure. She can't help but find you a lovely girl, for you are."

"I am not worried," Kathryn said flatly.

Lynette considered her for several moments. "Well, I do hope that you will try a little harder to find your tongue. Thus far, all you will do is give Lord Huntington calf eyes and fall over your tongue when he speaks directly to you. He will begin to think you witless at this rate. And, I might add, it is not the bashful, retiring female that gains notice. You must behave with proper modesty, of course, but--a little vivacity will make you far more appealing."

Kathryn felt her face heat. "I was not as bad as that, was I?"

"You were," Lynette said emphatically and completely without sympathy.

Kathryn thought it over. "I don't see how I am to mind my tongue and behave vivaciously at the same time. I am bound to say something most improper."



“Heaven forbid! If you will avoid quoting Dermot at every turn I am certain you will be far less likely to say something you ought not.”

\* \* \* \*

Despite her misgivings about the purpose of the outing, Kathryn was thrilled at the prospect of taking a carriage ride with Lord Huntington and had been pacing her room for nearly an hour when Lynette tapped on her chamber door and poked her head in.

“There! That was not so difficult, was it?”

Kathryn gave her a look. “I can not see why it is so important to keep a gentleman waiting for fifteen minutes, especially when I have been ready for at least an hour. His horses are bound to be cold from standing.”

Lynette sighed. “I despair of ever landing a husband for you, Kathryn, if you persist in behaving like a complete hoyden. Ladies do not bound down the stairs like an excited puppy the moment their escort arrives! Gentlemen expect to be kept waiting and they will think you odd if you behave differently than the other young ladies! Now you must run along before you keep him waiting so long that it exacerbates his temper.”

Kathryn was of the opinion that there was far too much to have to remember about this husband finding business. She would’ve been tempted to ignore most of it except for the doubts she nursed that Lynette might possibly be right. That being the case, she curbed her impulse to gallop down the stairs and descended with decorum.

Lord Huntington was pacing in the hallway, his watch in his hand, a decidedly irritated frown on his face. He glanced up when he heard her tread on the stairs, however, and the frown vanished.

“I’ve kept you waiting,” Kathryn exclaimed. “I am so sorry!”

His lips curled upward in a polite smile, but several emotions flickered in his eyes as his gaze moved slowly over her. “I thought perhaps my watch was wrong.”

Kathryn couldn’t entirely prevent a blush, although she thought she’d managed to inflect both surprise and dismay into her voice. She glanced up at him as he helped her settle a warm cloak around her shoulders. For a moment, their gazes met and Kathryn’s breath caught in her throat. In the next, he’d stepped away and politely offered his arm.

“There’s a touch of a chill in the air, but the sun is shining. I thought you might prefer the carriage to a stuffy coach,” he said as he escorted her down the walk to the carriage that awaited them.

Kathryn smiled at him as he helped her up onto the seat. “Yes, thank you. This will be nice, I think.”

When he’d climbed up beside her and settled a blanket over her lap, he flicked the reins and the carriage jerked into motion as the horses set off. “We’ll need to keep it brisk or we’ll be late and Amelia is liable to take it into her head to punish us by not being there when we arrive,” he said grimly.

Kathryn shifted uncomfortably, struggling with the temptation to confess the subterfuge Lynette had insisted upon. The problem with that was that he would be angry with Lynette then and she did not want him taking his temper out on Lynette if he grew angry about it. “Spring them!” she said finally.

He shot her a sharp glance. “We’re making good enough time. I wouldn’t want to discomfort you.”

Kathryn chuckled. "I am used to Dermot's driving. I can not think you are a worse driver."

A slow grin curled his lips. "You will not shriek and threaten to faint?"

"Certainly not, for I've not fainted a day in my life and I do try not to tell whoppers."

Chuckling, he whipped the horses up until the carriage was moving at a good clip. Kathryn's heart raced, but it wasn't from fear. She could see that he was a very skilled driver and she found the speed exhilarating.

He glanced at her several times as he made a turn and leveled the carriage out again. "Do you ride?"

Kathryn threw him a laughing glance. "I am Dermot's daughter! Of course I ride! He has been putting me up on horses since I first came to live with him--great unmanageable brutes, most of them. I was terrified at first, but I am a fairly accomplished horsewoman now."

Sebastian frowned as the comments touched off a dim memory. After searching his mind for a few moments, the memory surfaced. "I seem to recall snatching you off one of those brutes when you were within inches of breaking your neck."

Pleasure flooded Kathryn. "You do remember!"

He smiled wryly. "Not well. That was--years ago. You couldn't have been more than, what? Six?"

"Five. You were so furious about it I thought you were going to give me a thrashing, for you didn't believe me when I told you Dermot had put me on the horse. Then, when we got back to Elk Park and you found that I had told the truth, you loosened several of Dermot's teeth."

Sebastian frowned, coloring slightly. "I suppose I did. Shatterbrained thing for him to do and you not much more than an infant. It's a wonder you survived his parenting."

Kathryn shrugged. "He never claimed to be good at it, but I don't think I would've survived if he had not come looking for me." She sobered at that, but she didn't want bad memories to spoil her outing and quickly shuttled them to the back of her mind.

He sent her a piercing glance. "You remember ...?"

"A little," Kathryn lied, for she remembered far more than she wanted to, but she saw no sense in pretending she had no idea what he was talking about. Besides, doing so might just encourage him to probe more. "I've nothing to compare him with, so I always thought Dermot a very good parent. And I had Lynette."

"I'm glad to see you appreciate her as you should," he said slowly. "Loyalty is a very admirable trait. And I'm certain, since you were so young, you consider her almost like a second mother ...."

"She was a mother to me," Kathryn broke in. "Not almost."

Sebastian was silent for several moments. "She is still a servant," he said gently.

"So I should behave as if she is nothing?" Kathryn asked, keeping her voice neutral with an effort.

"I'm not suggesting you treat her any differently than you do now. Only that society will not see her in the same light."

“Well, it is a great pity that they feel so superior only because they were born with money when I’m sure they have no reason beyond that to feel superior at all.”

Sebastian sighed. “As it happens, I tend to agree with you. Beyond the trappings of wealth, there are many who are just as ignorant and behave no better than the lowest members of society--if as well. It is what it is, however, a tight click, and there are certain rules that can be broken and others that can’t. It will be--difficult for you to find acceptance as it is because of the behavior of your parents. There is no justice in it--for you are not responsible for your parents--but they will be looking for--flaws.”

Kathryn struggled with her anger. She didn’t particularly care whether she was accepted or not. She had done quite well all these years without their approval and Dermot, bless him, had seen to it that she had no real need to marry unless she just wanted to.

She thought she would enjoy the parties, having friends, going places, but not if she must always be wondering if she was being condemned behind smiling faces.

“Is it--important to you?” she asked finally.

He made a sound that she supposed was a laugh, though there was no humor in it. “Yes,” he said finally. “Else I will find myself facing opponents across the dueling field far more often than I like.”

He said it teasingly, but a shiver of uneasiness skated down Kathryn’s spine. Her belly clenched painfully. “You would not do something so foolish?”

He gave her a wry glance. “You are under my protection, Kitten. I would not hesitate if you were offered insult.”

## Chapter Five

Lady Linden looked as if she smelled something repellent. Kathryn returned her look with one of blank innocence. She had mastered that look over the years with very little effort. It went perfectly with the face nature had seen fit to bestow upon her and required nothing more than that she repress her wayward temper from time to time.

"She looks as if she has only just crawled out of bed," Amelia said with a sniff, "and not necessarily one she had not been sharing."

Sebastian glared at his sister, containing his fury with a great effort. "I did not bring Kat here so that you could insult her," he growled angrily. When he turned to look Kathryn over, however, his fury subsided abruptly. The speed he'd driven in his determination to make up the lost time had not been beneficial to her coiffure. Far more than a few wayward tendrils had escaped. Her cheeks were flushed--from the wind, as well, and her gown crumpled, and he realized Amelia hadn't merely been insulting for the sake of nastiness. Kathryn looked as if she'd been tumbled.

Unfortunately, the thought alone was sufficient to make his breeches uncomfortably tight. He shoved his hands into his pockets. "Perhaps a maid could help her tidy up a bit? My fault. I should not have chosen the carriage," he said more mildly.

Amelia, he saw when he returned his attention to her, was giving him a speculative look. Without a word, she moved to the bell pull and summoned a maid to help Kathryn freshen up.

When she'd left, he strolled casually to the fireplace, nudging the logs with the toe of his boot while he worked on regaining his wayward self control.

It irritated him that he had to. He was long past his randy youth--or so he'd thought--that difficult age where his member and his brain were mutually exclusive. And he could not even comfort himself with the thought that abstinence had made him needy. His mistress had thoroughly attended his needs not two days previously.

It was Kathryn. He could not be in her presence without feeling his blood begin a slow boil and it took very little added impetus to have him hard and ready--a smile, an accidental brush, a certain look that would come over her face when she glanced at him--and his brain simply ceased to function.

He would have to master the control issue--or put more distance between them, one of the two. He could not remain in a constant state of arousal without losing his mind, quite aside from the fact that it would be patently obvious to most anyone that looked at him.

Familiarity might solve the problem, but it could just as easily push his control completely from his grasp and then he would find himself in a hell of a mess.

"She has not much to say for herself," Amelia said finally, breaking into his thoughts.

"Precisely what did you expect her to say to that comment?" Sebastian growled without turning.

"I assumed, given her upbringing, that she would be accustomed to plain speaking," Amelia said a little stiffly.

Sebastian turned to give his sister an assessing look. "You might have simply declined my request straight out," he said tightly. "I meant what I said. I did not bring her to you so that you would have a target for your ill temper. If you mean to be forever throwing her 'upbringing' in her face, then tell me now and we will go."

Amelia settled back in her chair. "You are very quick to take me up."

"She is my ward--and as far as I know, alone in the world. She needs someone to protect her."

"Is it your protection you're offering?"

Sebastian's face hardened. "Sister or not, I will not tolerate even you questioning my honor, Amelia. If I'd had anything but the best of intentions I would not have requested your assistance."

Amelia's brows rose. "That is precisely my point, Sebastian! You can not be so naïve as to think we can take her about in polite society and she will not be slighted and insulted. Legitimized or not, she comes from the wrong side of the blanket. Depend upon it, there are still many around who will remember the original scandal and who will take it upon themselves to resurrect it! Even if not for that, we can only gloss over the situation as best we can--which will be very little.

"And you may deny it to me all you like, but even I can see the way you look at the girl. You may be certain that others will notice."

Sebastian repressed the impulse to deny it. Scrubbing a hand over his face as if he could wipe his thoughts away, he began to pace. "I don't expect miracles, only that you do the best you can for her. She's been through enough. She deserves a chance." He frowned, pausing when he reached the fireplace once more. "Do you recall the scandal?"

Amelia looked surprised. "You do not?"

He sent her a sour glance. "I despise gossip. You know very well I never listen to it."

She shrugged. "Sophia Kendall--her mother--came from a respectable, but impoverished family. Naturally enough, they cast her out when she became enceinte. I suppose without references she found it impossible to obtain respectable employment. She was working as a prostitute when she was killed by one of her--uh--customers, who apparently got a little rough. The man was prosecuted--which is why it made the papers, and became common knowledge. Dermot came looking for the child when he heard--I'll give him that--found her on the streets."

Sebastian stared at her, fighting a wave of nausea. "Good God!" he managed finally, appalled. He found it almost impossible to reconcile the delicate, fairy-like creature he had taken into his care with the image Amelia had drawn for him. On the streets, and her little more than an infant? It was a miracle she'd even survived until Dermot found her.

Amelia nodded. "Like a little savage, from what I heard, digging through the refuse for food. I must say I was actually pleasantly surprised, in that respect at least. He has done wonders with the girl."

Fury washed over Sebastian at her callous comment. He wasn't certain what he might have said, however, for at that moment he happened to glance toward the door of

the salon. Kathryn was standing in the doorway, white faced, and he had no doubt at all that she'd heard at least a part of the conversation.

Dragging her gaze from Amelia, she turned to look directly at him and for several moments their gazes locked. His gut clenched at the look in her eyes. After a moment, she blinked, slowly, and her gaze slid back to his sister. "Am I more presentable now?" she asked.

Her voice was almost perfectly neutral. Sebastian thought if he had not seen that look in her eyes he would not even have noticed the faint tremor in her voice.

"Much better," Amelia said approvingly, looking only faintly discomfited at being caught discussing Kathryn.

Summoning Kathryn with the wave of one hand, she instructed her to turn and looked her over with detachment. "She will need a new wardrobe," she pronounced finally. "If this is an example of what she has it will not do at all."

"Dermot arranged an allowance for me," Kathryn put in.

"Good God!" Amelia exclaimed. "You will not refer to him publicly as 'Dermot'! That will not do at all! You must call him father--or papa will do, if you prefer something more affectionate."

Kathryn sent Sebastian a glance and he held his breath. Sweat beaded his brow as he waited to see if she would tell Amelia what she'd told him. She sent him an angelic smile. "Papa," she parroted.

"Yes--well we should see about the wardrobe as soon as I've settled in. The sooner the better. You do not want to be thought a dowd."

\* \* \* \*

Kathryn wasn't certain how she'd managed to make it through the interview with Lady Linden, but she could not recall any strange glances and decided she must have pulled it off fairly well.

She had not managed to put the look Sebastian had given her from her mind. She felt like crying every time she thought about the pity and revulsion on his face, however, and determinedly thrust it to the back of her mind each time it surfaced.

She had thought that he had known everything and had accepted her for who she was. It was almost as devastating to realize that he'd had no inkling as it was to realize how shocked and revolted he was by her sordid past.

He would never look at her in quite the same way again.

She tried not to think about that.

To her relief, he did not attempt to broach the subject once they were seated in the carriage again for the return trip, but she couldn't shake the fear that he would confront her over it and spent most of the ride back absently chattering about anything that came to mind--anything at all to put off what she began to think was inevitable.

She didn't doubt that she sounded like an empty headed school girl, but she could not help it, for she wasn't currently in any state of mind to either try being creative or to negotiate the potential pot holes of trying to talk about anything of a more personal nature.

She was certainly in no state to judge his behavior.

He smiled woodenly in all the correct places, but he contributed little to the conversation she was holding with herself.

When they reached his house once more, he confirmed her fears before she could dash upstairs and lock herself in her room.

"I'd like to have a word with you in my study, Kathryn."

Kathryn studied him assessingly and finally bowed to the inevitable.

He gestured toward a chair when he had shut the door, but Kathryn remained by the door, more because her knees felt too weak to support her efforts to cross the room than because she thought there was any hope of escaping.

She wished he hadn't called her Kathryn.

He paced, glancing at her frowningly from time to time. She couldn't tell whether he was trying to think of a kind way to tell her he couldn't have her in his home or if he had something worse on his mind.

Dermot had often told her that she must expect her background to leave her open to insult.

The worst of it was that she didn't think she would actually have minded if Sebastian had asked her to be his mistress before. She wanted to be with him badly enough that she would have been happy to take whatever he offered. Now, she realized, knowing what he did and considering his reaction, it would not make her feel wanted. It would make her feel tainted.

Shoving his hands into his breeches pockets, he finally paused in front of the fireplace, studying her for a long moment before he transferred his frowning gaze to the logs burning on the hearth. "Don't look at me like that, Kitten. I'm sorrier than I can say that you had to hear that. Amelia always did have a short leash on her damned tongue."

Surprise flickered through Kathryn, thawing a little of the ice cold fear that had gripped her. "I already knew it," she said finally.

He sent her a startled glance and then frowned. "You remember ....?"

She thought about lying, but how would that change anything? "Yes."

Grasping the poker, he stabbed at the burning logs. "We will be walking on eggshells," he muttered. "We will just have to put the best face on it that we can. Dermot should've been horsewhipped--though I don't suppose, considering his youth, there was much he could've done--except to keep his ...."

As if he realized abruptly that he was speaking his thoughts out loud, he threw an uncomfortable glance in her direction.

Kathryn studied his expression, feeling warmth flow through her, thawing her more. She had not misjudged him. He was just as kind hearted as she remembered. She knew he had as many faults as Dermot, but his redeeming qualities far outweighed his flaws.

"Don't look at me like that either," he growled irritably. "I'm a man, Kitten, not a saint."

Kathryn tilted her head curiously. "How was I looking at you?"

He ground his teeth. "Never mind--wait." He seemed to wrestle with himself for several moments. "How much do you know about--about...?"

"Coupling? Everything--I'm pretty sure."

Several emotions chased across his face before a horrified expression settled there. "Good god, Kat! Don't say things like that!"

Kathryn frowned, confused. "But you asked."

He rubbed his forehead. "Now I've completely lost my train of thought," he muttered.

Kathryn bit her lip to hide a smile. She had not thought that she could say anything that would throw such a worldly man into complete disorder. He looked so adorably confused and disconcerted. "The way I looked at you," she prompted.

He frowned. "Yes. Don't do that! You must never look at a man that way. He will have all sorts of ideas."

"Did you?"

"Yes--uh--NO! Of course not. That is--only in the sense that I could see how it might put ideas into a man's head--that shouldn't be there--a man other than me." He cleared his throat and went back to pacing.

Kathryn watched him for several moments, wondering if he had said all that he'd intended to say. Finally, she felt compelled to offer him an out. He looked so uncomfortable and completely miserable that she began to feel guilty for putting him in such a position.

"Would you prefer that I go?"

He glanced up at her sharply, frowning. "Go?"

"Back to Elk Park."

He crossed the room and took her hand, lifting it to his lips. "On no account, you silly chit," he said smiling. "For I should have to go, as well, you being my ward, and I don't at all care for the country in the dead of winter."

Kathryn stared at the sharp contrast between her hand and his and felt something flutter in her belly, a strangeness, a stirring of warmth. Her smile when she met his gaze was slightly forced. "I have taken gross advantage of your friendship with Dermot," she said slowly. "I see that now. I will not think the less of you for sending me packing."

He swallowed audibly. He did not release her hand. It was almost as if he'd forgotten he still held it. "Don't encourage me to think only of my own comfort, Kitten. I am far too prone to thinking of no one but myself as it is. I do not regret that you came to me, only that I am such a poor hand at this that I am not at all confident that I can do right by you." His gaze flickered searchingly over her face and he swallowed again with an effort. "You are so--beautiful I think that there will be no trouble at all in finding you a suitable husband, only the difficulty of fending off the unsuitable."

She looked away. She was not naïve. In truth, she had not once considered that she was seeking a suitable alliance when she had come to London. She hadn't thought beyond the fact that she had an excuse to be near Lord Huntington. She saw, though, that that subterfuge would cause them both no end of difficulties. She was not likely to be considered a suitable bride by any of the mothers, even if the sons were willing to overlook the errors of her parents and offer matrimony instead of a slip on the shoulder.

She decided, though, that if he was willing to face society's censure, she would do her best to please him and his horrible sister. Pulling her hand from his grasp, she placed both of hers on his shoulders and lifted up to kiss him lightly on the cheek. "I will try not to cause you grief," she said smilingly when she had pulled away.

Sebastian caught her arms, pulling her hands from his shoulders and setting her a little away from him. A red haze had filled his mind as she had leaned against him, filled his senses with the essence of her nearness. The soft curves of her body, her warmth, her delicate fragrance had instantly driven rational thought almost beyond reach. Images had



immediately crowded into his mind of pulling her close and kissing her soft, inviting lips--of pushing her back against the wall and pressing his length against her until he could feel every inch of her body against his and it had taken all of his willpower to push her away instead of implementing the urges pounding through him. "You will cause me far less grief," he said, his smile almost feral, desire and need glittering in his eyes and making them appear almost feverish, "if you will refrain from such displays of affection. Do not--even for a moment--forget what I said to you before, Kat. I am a man, not a saint, and you will most assuredly regret it if you push me too far."

## Chapter Six

Kathryn supposed she was wicked. She knew she should be ashamed of the thoughts that ran through her head, but the look Sebastian had given her had thrilled her right down to her toes, and she had gone about her days since then in a cloud.

He desired her!

The sheer force of it had acted so powerfully upon her then that it had been almost as unnerving as it was exciting.

If she had been a properly brought up young woman, she supposed that it should have frightened her, or possibly even repulsed her. She was not a properly brought up young woman, though. She was Dermot's daughter, and the very moment she had seen the heated desire in his eyes, all of her promises to try to be good had gone right out of her head.

Fortunately for Sebastian's peace of mind, he had decided to play least in sight.

It had distressed Kathryn. For days she had wracked her brain from some subtle way that she might pierce his armor without allowing him to know that she had done it with great deliberation--no easy task when she did not have a subtle bone in her body. Armed with the new knowledge, she had been looking forward to the opportunity to see just how much of a push it would take to break through his determination to treat her like a lady.

She felt certain--now--that she could, if only she could find the right opportunity. Before, the only thing that she had been certain of was her own feelings for him, her desire to experience his passion, to be the recipient, finally, of those kisses and caresses she had seen him bestow on other women when he would visit Elk Park for one of Dermot's house parties.

She was deeply regretful that she had not seized the moment, but she had been so surprised at the repressed violence of emotions she sensed in him that she had been too stunned to consider how she might press her advantage.

But, perhaps, it was just as well? She did not think that she could have done anything at all that he would not later have realized was purposeful and then he would have been wary of falling for anything else. She would simply have to tease him as Lynette had suggested until he lost the sense of being the hunted and became the hunter.

Surely, it should not be as difficult as she'd thought before?

An unpleasant thought occurred to her then. What if it was not passion for her, as she'd thought, but merely his natural needs? Perhaps he had not been with a woman in a while and that was why it had nearly overwhelmed him?

The servants soon reassured her on that score. Not only did he have a mistress, but he had been firmly encamped in his mistress' boudoir ever since that day.

Jealousy reared its ugly head. It was reassuring to know that it had not merely been abstinence that had affected his behavior toward her, but she was not at all pleased to discover that it was a well known fact that a widowed lady of the ton was his mistress, and had been for many months.

That boded ill. If the lady had held his interest for that long, she did not doubt that lady had visions of marriage dancing in her head and she had an advantage no other woman could have--certainly not an inexperienced woman like herself, for she did not delude herself that knowledge was the same as experience.

By the time Lord Huntington's sister, Amelia, at last arrived, Kathryn was nearly beside herself with impatience. To her mind every moment of every day that ticked away lessened her chances of coming between Sebastian and his mistress, and more firmly entrenched his mistress in his affections. And without her chaperone, she could not even engage 'the enemy', for she was imprisoned in the house on Clermont Street and could not even see Sebastian, let alone try her wiles upon him.

Thus, although she did not particularly care for his sister, she was delighted when the woman finally arrived. Even more wonderful, Lady Amelia Linden was obviously anxious to discharge her duty to her brother and return home for she did not even wait until she was fully settled before she had the carriage brought around and whisked Kathryn off to procure a wardrobe for her.

Her charity with Sebastian's sister ended there. Once they had seated themselves in one of the most fashionable boutiques in London, Amelia proceeded to choose the most horrid fabrics available.

"Technically, you are still in mourning," Amelia pointed out coolly at the expression of dismay on Kathryn's face.

Kathryn stared at her blankly while that slowly sank in and her cheeks reddened uncomfortably. The truth was she had not mourned for Dermot at all, because she had not believed for one moment that anything had actually happened to him. She thought it was much more likely that he had thought of a clever way to avoid presenting her and when he discovered that was no longer a threat, he would come out of hiding.

She might not have except that Dermot had been clearly dismayed when she had questioned him about the possibility, as if it had not once occurred to him before that she would grow up. Very shortly afterward he had gone off exploring, telling her that he had made arrangements for her should he not return within a reasonable amount of time, but if fate did not intervene he would see to her presentation himself upon his return.

Amelia was right, however. Unless she wanted Sebastian to know that Dermot was probably very much alive she had to at least pretend to believe that he was not, which meant that she was only in her second year of mourning.

Dismay filled her, for she could not think that the colors were at all flattering to her. The styles were even worse, for Amelia insisted that they must be as modest as was acceptable without appearing completely dowdy, or exaggerated to the point of absurdity. They did not want it to appear that they were trying too hard for respectability, after all!

Her spirits thoroughly dampened, Kathryn merely nodded thereafter at each selection that Amelia made, keeping her thoughts, and her dismay, to herself.

Lynette was not at all helpful.

"Oh my! We would not make very good conspirators, would we?" she said with a self-conscious chuckle. "It is a very good thing indeed that Lady Linden has taken you under her sponsorship, else we would have been thoroughly undone! I am amazed that Lord Huntington did not think of that himself, but then I suppose he is simply too stunned yet to have thought it through. I had not thought of that, but then I have not his excuse and I certainly should have--except that I am convinced there is no substance at all to the

speculation regarding your father's disappearance. Dermot is far too resourceful and wily to have succumbed to anything the savages might have come up with. Mark my word, he is only hiding out so that he will not have to face the unpleasantness--uh. Well, I am certain you know exactly what I meant, for it isn't at all unpleasant a task to see you settled, but Dermot was never much for such things."

Kathryn paced to the window and stared glumly out at the street below, watching the drift of snowflakes that fluttered past. "She has said that most of my wardrobe is totally unsuitable, given the circumstances, and we will only be able to attend the dulllest parties in any event."

"She said that?"

Kathryn flicked a glance at Lynette. "Not in precisely those words, but I am certain that is what she meant."

"That is disappointing!" Lynette remarked irritably. "You might have attended dull parties if we had stayed in the country."

Kathryn sighed. She didn't particularly care. She was disappointed, but mostly because she couldn't imagine that Lord Huntington would have any interest at all in attending the sort of affairs Lady Linden had in mind.

"He has a mistress," she said presently, idly tracing patterns in the fog her breath created on the windowpane.

"Who? Oh! I collect you mean Lord Huntington. Heavens, child! I will not ask where you heard this, for I know the servants' penchant for gossip, but you can not be surprised, surely?"

"I would have been amazed if he had not," Kathryn retorted. "He is handsome, personable, and wealthy--not at all the sort to not have a mistress, even if I had not known his reputation."

Lynette did not respond and after a few moments, Kathryn turned to look at her questioningly. "You are too practical to be vexed by something so insignificant?" Lynette asked finally.

Kathryn nursed serious doubts that she was practical at all if that meant that she would not be bothered by such things. She had not thought that she would. Perhaps, if she felt that Sebastian loved her, or if they were wed, she would be able to ignore such things. Under the circumstances, though, she found the arrangement extremely distressing.

Lynette focused her attention upon her needlework. She was frowning, but Kathryn thought it far more likely that it was something she'd said than the needlework that had brought that look of displeasure to her face. "It is the best possible solution given the way of the world and men's baser instincts. Low women have access to ways that can prevent them from bearing one child after another. Ladies do not and if they were to have their husband's undivided attention, they would soon find their homes bursting at the seams with offspring."

Kathryn frowned in confusion. "I was told that his mistress was a lady of the ton. Why is it acceptable for her to be his mistress?"

"She is a widow and childless. You may be certain that both she and Lord Huntington do not expect any unpleasant surprises. In any case, she is a woman of experience. Perhaps she is hoping that her liaison with Lord Huntington will prove that

she is not barren after all and that will capture her a wealthy husband. She would know what to do if that did not prove to be the case, in any event.”

Since Kathryn had feared that that was exactly what the woman had in mind, the response did nothing to cheer her. She was curious, however. Ordinarily, Lynette avoided this sort of subject. “What would she do?” she asked, moving away from the window and settling in a seat across from Lynette.

Lynette colored faintly. “Goodness! I am not sure I know the particulars. It is only that I am certain that there are answers, for men will be men and, when all is said and done, ladies are not so different from any other woman. They can be seduced by a handsome rogue as easily as anyone else, I’m sure.”

“I am not a child anymore, Lynette,” Kathryn pointed out. “I understand how a man breeds a child on a woman. I just don’t understand how one could do that without breeding one.”

Lynette sent her a censorious glance. “I am not convinced that you ever were a child! Sometimes I think that you were borne a young woman. But you certainly missed no opportunity to learn what there was to know of coupling! You have not been sneaking around the Park watching Dermot and his cronies lately?”

“No,” Kathryn retorted promptly, and with perfect truth since Dermot had been gone far too long for anything she might have seen to be considered ‘lately’.

Lynette eyed her shrewdly, well aware of Kathryn’s penchant for qualifying her ‘truths’. “Not since I caught you and thrashed you about it?”

Guilt crept into Kathryn’s expression.

“I thought as much. That is not at all the sort of things a young lady should see.”

Kathryn gave her a look. “Why? So that they are easier prey?”

“I can not argue with your logic, but I think I have impressed upon you that it is not acceptable in polite society, nevertheless. You are supposed to be ignorant until your husband sees fit to enlighten you.”

“Having watched, I am not at all convinced that I would have been enlightened if I had been bedded by many of them. They did not strike me as being particularly good at it--except Sebastian.”

“I am fairly certain he would not be pleased to know that you had observed. He would not have taken his women to another room if he had not wanted privacy.”

“You watched!” Kathryn exclaimed.

Lynette reddened. “I was curious as to why you found it so fascinating,” she hedged.

Kathryn chuckled. “If you stayed long enough to see Lord Huntington depart, then you had plenty of time to assuage your curiosity beforehand.” She frowned.

“Anyway, I was not curious at first. I went because ....”

“You were afraid?” Lynette guessed when Kathryn did not finish. “You saw things you should not have, and yet I can hardly credit that you would remember. You were so young!”

Kathryn got up abruptly and returned to the window. “There are many things I remember that I wish I did not,” she mumbled. “But I’m not at all sorry that I went, for I realized that it did not always have to be that way and I’m not certain I would have believed it if I had not seen.”

Lynette sighed impatiently. "You have certainly outgrown your fear to be asking me the sort of questions that you were and it does not take a great deal of thought to figure out why. You are not thinking of doing anything--outrageous, are you?"

"Like what?" Kathryn asked curiously.

Lynette stared at her. "Well! You can not expect me to supply you with possibilities! Your imagination is fertile enough as it is. You are far too old for me to turn you over my knee, young lady, but I will not aid and abet you in anything unseemly. I am perfectly willing to help you all that I can, if you have your heart set on marrying Lord Huntington. But he is far too wily to be snared by parson's noose by a school girl's awkward attempt at seduction!"

Kathryn's brows rose. "I had not thought of that," she murmured thoughtfully. "I suppose he would not be very pleased if I were to try that."

## Chapter Seven

"Kathryn Louise Marshall!" Lynette exclaimed, horrified that she had fallen into just the trap she had wished to avoid.

Kathryn gurgled with laughter. "You are far too easy to tease!"

"Far too easy to tease about what?" asked a deep, distinctly male voice virtually on the heels of Kathryn's comment.

Both women looked up self-consciously at Lord Huntington, who stood in the doorway of the salon. Kathryn was instantly thrown into complete disorder, partly because she wasn't certain what he might have overheard, and partly because she had not seen him in nearly a week. She saw, though, that he was smiling and his manner easy and she could not believe that he had heard anything that she preferred he hadn't.

"Am I intruding?" he asked when neither woman spoke, simply gaping at him as if they were too stunned by his appearance to gather their wits.

Lynette forced an uneasy laugh. "Certainly, not, my lord. We are always pleased to see you, are we not, Kathryn?"

Kathryn managed a smile of agreement and moved to the chair she had occupied before. After glancing around the room curiously, Lord Huntington took a seat on the settee beside Lynette. "My sister is not about?" he asked finally, when no one else seemed inclined to talk.

"She has gone to visit a friend of hers," Kathryn supplied.

His brows rose upward before descending into a frown of annoyance. "And you were not invited?"

"I am not allowed to go out until my new wardrobe is finished."

His frown deepened, but it was more curious now and less angry. "It seems to me that you should have something suitable for such an excursion."

Kathryn studied her hands. She didn't really want to remind him that she was supposed to be in half mourning now, particularly when she had not behaved the least like a grieving daughter. He was going to think her a monster to care so little, or a scheming hussy and one would be almost as bad as the other. "Lady Linden tells me it is the custom to wear half-mourning the second year," she said hesitantly, hoping that he would interpret that to mean it had been ignorance that she hadn't and not a lack of feeling.

When she dared a look at him, she saw he looked stunned. In a moment, a flush darkened his face. "It is a very good thing that I thought of Amelia," he said slowly. "Else we would have made a fine mess of things. She is quite right."

He got up abruptly and began to pace. Since Kathryn had already realized that his pacing was a sign of disturbing thoughts, she felt uneasiness settle over her.

"I can not see that there would be any harm in taking you for a drive in the park, however," he said finally. "You have been cooped up far too long as it is. Everyone will begin to think that you are in hiding, which would be a very bad thing."

Kathryn was surprised but pleased. She didn't particularly care what 'they' thought and the comment slid off of her without bothering her a whit. "You came to take me to drive?"

He looked at her uncomfortably and Kathryn realized at once that that had not been his purpose in coming. She had no idea what his purpose might have been, but that realization dampened her enthusiasm for the outing immediately. She returned her attention to her hands, trying to control the uncomfortable heat that rose in her cheeks as her emotions got the better of her.

"It is a fine day. I happened to notice on my way over that there were a number of people taking advantage of the sunshine."

She wasn't certain she believed that, but since she had no idea whether his drive might have taken him by the park or not, she accepted it.

"What a delightful prospect! And most thoughtful of Lord Huntington to think about you when I know very well that you are growing tired of my company!" Lynette put in. "I will go at once and fetch your cloak and bonnet."

"You will accompany us, of course," Lord Huntington said as Lynette set her needlework aside and got up.

"Oh?" she sent a glance toward Kathryn. "That is most agreeable of you, Lord Huntington," she added after a moment. "I will return in a trice."

"You don't have to do that," Kathryn said, getting to her feet as Lynette scurried toward the door. "I can go up and collect a cloak for each of us."

Lynette waved her away. "Don't be silly. Stay and visit with Lord Huntington. It will only take me a few moments."

Kathryn settled again, staring at the open door as Lynette disappeared through it. She rather thought she would have been happier, however, if Lynette had produced some excuse why they could not go driving. She had been looking forward to seeing Sebastian again with a mixture of hope and misery. Misery had taken the upper hand within a very brief space of time and the offered treat seemed more like a trial than a pleasurable outing. She was not happy to discover that he did not appear to have come to see her at all or that the offer of an outing seemed to be more from a sense of obligation than from any wish to bear her company. She would have preferred not to go at all when she must pretend to be delighted when she wasn't.

"You and Amelia are rubbing along tolerably well, I trust?"

Kathryn glanced at him when he spoke and discovered his pacing had brought him to the settee once more where he had seated himself. She studied him candidly for several moments and saw that this question was merely a polite attempt at conversation and that he did not expect her to complain. She doubted that he would welcome it either.

From Amelia's perspective, she supposed they were doing tolerably well. So long as she meekly accepted whatever Amelia said without question, then they rubbed along quiet well. The moment she expressed any opinion of her own, they did not. "Tolerably, yes," she responded finally.

His brows rose questioningly, but she did not accept the invitation to elaborate.

"She has settled in then?"

"I think so. She seems very happy to have her old room back."

Perplexed by the comment, Sebastian's brows drew together. "Her old room?"



“From her childhood, I suppose. The blue room.”

“My memory must be faulty. I can not recall that the blue room was hers. Weren’t you settled in the blue room?”

“She asked if I would mind giving it up to her since she had so many fond memories attached to it and of course I didn’t--mind, that is.”

Before Sebastian could pursue the matter further, they heard a crash in the hallway that brought both of them to their feet.

“Lynette!” Kathryn gasped, rushing over to her companion, who was sprawled at the foot of the stairs her face screwed up in pain.

“How clumsy of me!” Lynette gasped as Kathryn knelt beside her to look her over worriedly.

“Where are you hurt?”

“My pride only, I think,” Lynette responded to Sebastian’s question, struggling to rise as both Kathryn and Sebastian tried to help her up at once. She winced once she was standing, however. “I think I may have twisted my ankle.”

Kathryn studied her companion with a mixture of anxiety and suspicion as it occurred to her to wonder if the ‘fall’ had been staged, for she knew Lynette was not prone to clumsiness. Perhaps, she thought, Lynette had noticed that she didn’t particularly want to go?

“You poor thing! Let me help you up to your room and we will send for a physician to have a look at you.”

“Oh no! I’m sure that isn’t at all necessary.”

“I will carry her up,” Sebastian said firmly. “If she is unsteady on her feet, then she does not need to attempt it, particularly when she is liable to take a tumble again and take you with her, Kat.” He glanced around then at the servants that had come into the hall. “Mr. Meeks, if you will send for Dr. Clements?”

Lynette reddened, but Kathryn didn’t know if that was from being lifted into Sebastian’s arms, or distress, or if she was merely embarrassed at having such a fuss made. “I’m sure that won’t be necessary. I have only turned it.”

“We will have it checked nevertheless to make certain there is no break,” Sebastian said as he started up the stairs with her.

Gathering up the cloaks and bonnets she’d dropped, Kathryn followed anxiously in their wake, directing Sebastian to the room that was Lynette’s and then scurrying around in front of them to open the door.

When Sebastian had settled her companion in a chair near the fire, Kathryn found a stool and directed her to prop her injured foot upon it, then knelt to examine the injury herself in spite of Lynette’s scolding.

She frowned when she had looked at the ankle in question. “It does not look very bad,” she said a little doubtfully, giving Lynette a piercing look.

“As I said,” Lynette retorted, refusing to look at Kathryn. “I will be quite alright once I’ve rested a bit. I think it frightened me more than anything else, except of course the embarrassment over my clumsiness. You must not let this spoil your outing, my dear.”

Kathryn sat back on her heels. “Oh, but I can not go now.” She glanced at Sebastian. “I would far rather wait until the doctor has seen her.”

Sebastian was eyeing Lynette speculatively. "It would be a pity for Miss Shirley to miss out if she feels well enough to go."

"Well, as to that, I am a little unsettled by the incident. I will be quite all right, though, and I won't hear of Kathryn missing out on the drive only because of my clumsiness for she has been quite blue from having to stay in so much."

Kathryn reddened, having realized by that time that it was indeed a ploy on Lynette's part, though not as she'd thought to present her with an excuse not to go. Rather, her aim was clearly to send Kathryn off alone with Sebastian. At any other time, she might have blessed her for it. Considering that Sebastian had felt compelled to offer, however, and not come for that purpose at all, she wasn't particularly happy about Lynette's little drama. "As if I could enjoy myself when I would be worried about you!"

"You are certain you don't wish for us to wait until the doctor has seen you?"

"As to that, I'm not at all comfortable with the physician being sent for at all, but, certainly you must go on and enjoy yourselves."

"That is very charitable of you, Lynette," Kathryn said firmly, "but I will not hear of it. Thank you so much for the offer to take me driving, my lord, but I will stay with Lynette. Perhaps another time?"

Sebastian grasped Kathryn's arm and helped her to her feet. "I have a feeling that Miss Shirley would prefer that you not fuss over her. If you are certain Miss Shirley?"

"Absolutely! And he's quite right, my dear. I will feel ever so much better if I can simply sit quietly and regain my composure. I am feeling much better already--only a twinge now and then," she added.

Since there seemed no hope for it, Kathryn bowed to the inevitable and, after settling the cloaks and bonnets on the bed, picked her own bonnet up and moved to the mirror over the dressing table to adjust it, tying the ribbons firmly under her chin. She jumped when Sebastian settled her cloak over her shoulders, glancing up at his reflection in the mirror.

His gaze was sardonic, and she had to resist the urge to glare at him, for she could see that he suspected that she was as guilty as Lynette in her little subterfuge. Looking away, she fastened the cloak and moved away from him. "I will check on you when I get back then," she told Lynette as Sebastian tucked her hand in the crook of his arm and escorted her to the door.

"Yes! You must tell me all about it when you return," Lynette said happily.

"A most unfortunate thing," Sebastian said as they descended the stairs.

"Yes," Kathryn muttered. "Perhaps we should wait for Lady Linden to return? I'm sure she will be back soon."

"Not if she is making her round of visits," Sebastian said dryly, settling his hat upon his head as they left the house and made their way down the walk toward his waiting carriage.

"I do hope that she will not make a habit of this," Sebastian murmured as he climbed up beside Kathryn and took the reins.

Kathryn glanced at him, feigning a look of puzzlement. "Lady Linden?"

"Miss Shirley."

"That is most unkind," Kathryn retorted.

Sebastian sent her a look. "You did not fall for that?"

Kathryn found she couldn't refrain from blushing. "You are not suggesting that she fell on purpose?"

"I'm suggesting she didn't fall at all. I have had enough experience with designing females to know when I am being cozened, and what's more that little ploy should make it abundantly clear even to you that she is not fit to chaperone you."

Kathryn couldn't help but wonder if that remark harkened back to something he might have overheard of her and Lynette's earlier conversation, but if it did then he had certainly hidden any suspicions it might have aroused well until this moment. Regardless, it thoroughly annoyed her to have him suggest that she and Lynette were trying to manipulate him down the isle--not that she hadn't considered it, but that was beside the point. She had certainly had nothing to do with Lynette's thinly veiled attempt to get her alone with Lord Huntington. "If that is what you thought, then I do not know why you insisted upon the drive at all. It seemed very evident to me that you had not intended to invite me on an outing at all."

Sebastian said nothing for several moments, but since he was negotiating a turn Kathryn wasn't certain whether it was her waspishness or merely concentration upon his task that held him silent.

"Is that why Miss Shirley had to maneuver you into the outing?"

Kathryn considered pretending she had no idea what he was talking about. She dismissed it. "I prefer not to be where I am not wanted," she said shortly. "Especially when I have a choice in the matter. It is bad enough when one has no choice."

"Your company is not unwelcome," Sebastian said after a rather prolonged and uncomfortable silence.

"You are so gracious, my lord!" Kathryn snapped, not appeased in the least.

"I am ham handed," Sebastian said dryly. "I did not mean that the way it sounded. You are very--distracting. I see my kitten has claws."

She sent him a resentful glance. "Well, then I suppose I must apologize for it must certainly be all my fault! And I do not have claws! And do not call me kitten if you mean to be nasty."

He hooked a finger beneath her chin and forced her to look at him, studying her face for several moments before he released her. "If I apologize for being so ill tempered and gauche, will you forgive me?"

His voice was cajoling, but she didn't really feel like forgiving him. He had not wanted to take her and, if that was not bad enough, had practically accused her of manipulating him into doing so. "I suppose, if you did, then I would have to," she said, not very graciously.

He released an impatient sigh. "Then I offer my humblest apologies."

She couldn't help but smile at his long suffering voice, though she was still miffed with him. "Then you are forgiven and I will try to enjoy my ride in spite of you and Lynette."

"You are so gracious," he said dryly.

"I have been told that I am," she said, hiding a smile.

"You are not very familiar with irony, I take it," he said in an amused voice.

She sent him a look of blank innocence. "Were you being ironic?"

He chuckled as he slowed the carriage and turned into the park.

Kathryn forgot her irritation with him when she saw that he had either guessed correctly or he actually had been by the park. Though by no means crowded, there were quite a few carriages and folk on horseback threading their way in a slow procession along the cobbled street through the park. The park itself was cloaked in winter garb, but she rather thought it had a charm all its own.

She was in a mood to be pleased. Despite the rocky start, she was glad of a chance to get out and see the elegant ladies and gentlemen of London. She paid little attention to Sebastian after that, focusing on scanning the faces of the people that passed, although she didn't expect to see anyone she knew.

To her surprise, she did see a familiar face, however.

He rode up on a prancing bay and swept his hat off, smiling widely, his dark eyes gleaming with some emotion she wasn't certain of. "Miss Marshall! What brings you to town?"

She felt Sebastian stiffen beside her and glanced at him in surprise. "My lord, this is Lord Giles Rotterdam, a friend of Der--uh--papa's."

"We are acquainted," Sebastian said evenly.

"We were up at Cambridge together," Lord Rotterdam said at almost the same moment, with no appearance of being put out in the least by the stony quality of Sebastian's voice. "Although, of course, Sebastian was an under classman."

They might once have been friends, also, but it was obvious they no longer were from the way the two bristled. Kathryn probed her memory but found she couldn't recall any incident that had occurred between the two at Elk Park, or even if they had both been visitors at the same time. It seemed strange that they would not have, for both men were very good friends with Dermot and had visited regularly except that Lord Huntington had ceased to come after Dermot had left and Lord Rotterdam had visited several times since then.

"I was concerned and vastly disappointed when last I visited Elk Park and discovered that you were no longer in residence," Giles continued after a brief pause, dismissing Lord Huntington. "Have you had no word from Dermot?"

Kathryn shook her head. "None in over a year. But I simply can not accept that something has happened to him. Mr. Winston thought it best to make arrangements for me, however, and Lord Huntington has kindly taken me as his ward as my father had requested."

"Has he?" Giles asked, his gaze locking with Sebastian's once more.

This time Kathryn was in no doubt that there was hostility between the two men. It fairly sizzled her hair, though she was at a loss to know what it might be.

"Then I expect that I shall see you at some function or other about town. Do you go to the Carlson's Ball on Friday?"

Kathryn would've thought it would be impossible for Sebastian to be any stiffer and yet she sensed a new jolt of tension go through him at that. Curious, she turned to glance at him, but she found it impossible to read anything in his expression. "Lord Huntington's sister, Lady Linden is sponsoring me and it is she who decides what functions we attend, so I don't know. I am still in half mourning, you must know, and it would not be right for me to go to anything too ... gay."

"In that case, perhaps not, then, for Lady Carlson's balls are generally a crush, are they not, Sebastian?"

The smile that went with that question was patently provoking. Kathryn had a very bad feeling in the pit of her stomach that whatever history the two men had between them was not the current matter of contention, but fresh provocation. Before she could even begin to formulate any sort of questions that might help her unravel the puzzle, though, Lord Rotterdam hailed a carriage that was drawing even with theirs. Turning to look, Kathryn saw the woman seated in the carriage cast a speculative glance over her. "Sebastian! Giles! What a lovely surprise to come upon the two of you!" she exclaimed with a bright smile. "Now I have the opportunity to pester the two of you for a verbal commitment to attend my little gathering on Friday so you can not pretend you had no notion of it."

"Lady Carlson," Sebastian acknowledged her tightly, bowing rather stiffly. "May I present my ward, Kathryn Marshall?"

"Your ward?" the lady responded with obviously feigned surprise. "How droll! Marshall," she repeated thoughtfully, but finally shook her head. "I hope you will forgive me, my dear. The name is familiar, but I can't quite place you."

Kathryn instantly disliked the woman. She wasn't completely certain why, except that she saw the woman was being deliberately deceitful. It was patently obvious that she had not only known about the fact that Sebastian was her guardian, but she also knew that Dermot was her father. "Lord Dermot Marshall," Kathryn responded, keeping her voice even with an effort.

"Lud! And I'd no notion he ...."

She did not complete the sentence for at just that moment she glanced at Sebastian and turned perfectly white. After struggling for several moments to recover her composure, she managed a smile that looked less sincere than the smile before. "My condolences for your loss. You must come and visit me one day and we will reminisce about dear Dermot."

"We are blocking traffic," Sebastian said stiltedly. "We must move on."

The carriage jerked into motion again before he had scarcely completed the less than gracious excuse. Unsettled by the undercurrents, Kathryn glanced back as they pulled away and saw Lord Rotterdam guide his horse over to Lady Carlson's carriage.

"You do not like Giles?" Kathryn asked tentatively after a lengthy, uncomfortable silence.

Sebastian slid an unfathomable glance at her. "Giles?"

Kathryn felt the blood rush from her face at his tone only to rush back with a vengeance. There was brooding violence in his eyes and although she couldn't think it was because she had used Rotterdam's Christian name, she still felt guilty for some unknown reason. "Lord Rotterdam."

"But you are in the habit of calling him Giles?"

Kathryn grew angry, for she could see what he was implying. "I have known him since I was a small child--like all of Dermot's friends--and quite often called them by their given name. It is certainly not what you are thinking!"

"But you believe you know what I was thinking?"

Kathryn glared at him and then pointedly ignored him for the remainder of their ride, which was, thankfully, short, for Sebastian guided the carriage directly through the park and out the other side, turning the horses once more toward the house on Clermont Street.

## Chapter Eight

As angry as Kathryn was that Sebastian seemed to be calling her morals into question, she was not so wrapped up in her sense of injustice that her mind did not turn the other events over and over. By the time Sebastian drew his horses up at the mansion, she was fairly certain she knew, at least in part, why he had behaved so oddly.

That woman was his mistress.

She dismissed it at first, for the woman was out driving in the park, mingling with society, and she thought she must have been mistaken, but there seemed no other way to interpret Lady Carlson's behavior.

There had been something very proprietary about the way she had summed Kathryn up when she had stopped her carriage beside them, and everything she had said afterwards had certainly been calculated to set Kathryn's back up. Since she had never met the woman in her life, she could think of no reason other than jealousy for the unprovoked attack ... and it had been an attack, a not terribly subtle one.

Even Giles had known about it, she realized. He had not stopped to visit with her so much as he had seized the opportunity to annoy Sebastian.

Or perhaps he had initially stopped because he was surprised to see her in town, but the opportunity to irritate Sebastian had arisen and he had been swift to take it up.

She didn't know quite how she felt about the incident, unsettled, she supposed. It was not as if she hadn't known of the woman's existence. She didn't quite grasp the workings of the society she had found herself in, though. It seemed fairly common knowledge, even among the ton that there was an affair, and yet she was accepted? How was her behavior more accepted than any other woman of loose morals?

Or, perhaps, the ton reserved that right for themselves? They would all go about pretending to be very good, very moral and upstanding, turn a blind eye when someone of their own group chose a lover and look down their noses at everyone else?

Her mother had not chosen the life of a prostitute. She had been turned out into the streets to starve, or make her way in whatever way she could. But she was less than nothing, and because of that her own morals were questionable?

Perhaps they were. But she still could not see the fine distinction the ton made.

For that matter, she could not see why it was perfectly acceptable for men to go about coupling with any female they pleased, leaving a string of bastards behind them.

"You will keep your distance from Rotterdam," Sebastian said, abruptly breaking into her thoughts.

"I beg your pardon?"

"He is a scoundrel and not fit company for any young girl who wishes to protect her reputation."

Kathryn stared at him with a mixture of stunned surprise and outrage. "But--he is quite old. And I have known him forever. He is a very good friend of Dermot's. Am I to cut him if he speaks to me?"

Sebastian reddened, giving her a look she found difficult to interpret. "Old? His is ... never mind. I am not suggesting that you give him a cut--very likely you will not run into him at all at any of the functions that Amelia takes you to, but, however old you may think him, his reputation alone is enough to tarnish yours if you are seen in his company."

"Truly?" Kathryn asked, intrigued. "I had not thought him as bad as that. Of course, Dermot is a rake and I am sure all his closest friends are, as well, but---you thought he was flirting with me?"

"I do not think it. I know it," Sebastian retorted, obviously annoyed.

"Oh." She thought it over for several moments. "Well, he is not so old as all that, and he is very handsome."

"He is far too old for you."

"I had thought so, but if you are right, then he does not seem to think so," Kathryn said, enjoying herself thoroughly by now. She supposed it was rather reckless to provoke him in his current mood, but it made her feel much better to annoy him.

"Kathryn!" Sebastian growled.

She gave him a look of blankest innocence. "What?"

"I am very serious."

"But--I am certain that he would make a very good sort of husband. Perhaps he is considering settling down?"

Sebastian ground his teeth. "You will find out soon enough what he is interested in if you set your cap at him."

"And what would that be?" Kathryn asked, all innocence, batting her eyelashes at him as he pulled the carriage up in front of the manor and turned to look at her.

"You know very well what I mean," he growled.

"Hmm," Kathryn said thoughtfully. "Perhaps you are right, but then Dermot always said that he would never buy a horse until he had ridden it to make certain he enjoyed the ride and I can not help but think that it would be folly to consider doing otherwise. For if one bought it first, then one might end up with a most unpleasant surprise."

She climbed down from the carriage while Sebastian was still gaping at her and was halfway up the walk before he recovered sufficiently to leap from the carriage and overtake her. Fortunately, the butler had heard the carriage drive up and was already opening the door as Sebastian caught her arm. He pulled her to a stop, smiling for the benefit of the butler though the effort looked far more like a predatory snarl than a smile. "We will discuss this later," he said through gritted teeth. "In private."

Kathryn looked him over frankly. "I don't think that would be wise at all. After all, you are one of Dermot's dear friends, also. And you have said I should avoid the company of rakes."

They bid each other an excessively pleasant good day once Sebastian had escorted her inside, but Kathryn could see the promise of retribution in his eyes as he departed.

Lynette called to her from the front parlor as she headed toward the stairs. Sighing, she retraced her steps and looked in on her companion.

"I'm glad to see that you are feeling better."

"It really amounted to nothing. Did you have a pleasant drive, my dear?"

Kathryn forced a smile. "Very. I have a touch of headache, though, and I believe I will go up and lie down awhile before dinner."

She did not actually feel like lying down, but after she had thrown off her cape and bonnet, she pulled her gown off and tossed it over a chair and climbed under her covers anyway, staring up at the canopy overhead.

Her heart still beat unpleasantly fast with excitement for a time, and she realized that she was almost sorry that circumstances had prevented the 'discussion' Sebastian had promised. She thought she might have felt better if they had had a rousing argument instead of being forced by protocol to behave with such civility.

She was not displeased for all that. Since the argument she had wanted had been denied her, infuriating Sebastian and leaving him with a frustration similar to her own was some salve.

She had no right to be angry about his mistress. She knew that. She had no claims upon him even now and she certainly had not before she arrived. She had accepted the situation.

It was a very different matter to be confronted and antagonized by his mistress, however. She knew very well that that was not Sebastian's fault, and certainly not his doing and she was not angry with him for that reason. Lady Carlson had taken all of that upon herself, most likely because she resented him taking her as his ward, possibly even because she felt threatened. That was an intriguing possibility, but she could think of no logical reason for the woman to feel threatened and decided that it was purely the illogical reaction of jealousy.

What made her angry was Sebastian's order to stay away from Giles. She supposed he was not only within his rights as her guardian, but obligated by his role to protect her. She could not think that she was in any danger from Giles, though. He had never behaved the least improperly toward her, had not that she could recall even shown an interest in her as a woman.

She did not like to think that she must now behave toward him as if they were not friends and she also resented being told what to do when she had been in the habit all of her life of doing as she damned well pleased.

Perhaps that in itself was sufficient to prove she was not suitable as a wife? Everything else aside, and dismissing society and their selective censure, perhaps she did not have the disposition for marriage? The restraints of society chafed her. How much worse would marriage be when she would have a husband who expected to tell her what she could do and when she could do it?

The rub was that she was not old enough yet to be considered independent and, as her guardian, Sebastian had the right to accept a proposal for her from anyone he thought suitable.

That was an unnerving prospect and one she had not considered before.

Dismay filled her. She had thought of nothing beyond being with Sebastian when she had begun to pester Mr. Winston to execute the guardianship and now she had gotten herself into a most unpleasant position. Regardless of what Lynette had said, she knew that she must consider that Sebastian might not be brought around to the idea of marriage at all, and specifically to her. Giles was his senior by five or six years and he seemed very content to continue as he was. It began to seem more than likely that the same could be said for Sebastian. And she was fairly certain that he would not consider taking her



for his mistress--he was surprisingly determined to behave honorably--which was bound to become more distasteful for him in time, instead of less so.

He would be searching very assiduously for a prospective husband for her so that he could discharge his duty and go about his business. It was possible that her half mourning would defer any danger of an alliance this season, but what if Dermot did not return before the next? She would have to negotiate her way through many seasons before she was considered too old to worry with any longer and allowed to embrace spinsterhood.

Sighing, she tossed the covers off and got up. She would have to think of something to do in the event that she could not attain the goal she had set for herself. If Sebastian would consider marrying her, then she would be willing to try to grow accustomed to the restrictions of marriage, but she could think of no one else she would be willing to do that for. Therefore, she needed a plan to remove the possibility if Sebastian did not want her.

She simply would not accept less than what she wanted, and she had no desire to marry only for the sake of proving she was desirable enough to catch a husband.

\* \* \* \*

"Sebastian!" Clarendra exclaimed with an attempt to pretend pleased surprise. "I did not expect you, did I?"

Sebastian flicked an assessing gaze over her. "You should have."

His voice was even, but she was familiar enough with him that she did not miss the fury simmering beneath the surface of his calm. Her brows rose, but she was completely unable to prevent a blush from mounting her cheeks. Discarding the attempt to play the innocent, she tossed her bonnet, gloves and caplet onto a chair and moved to a mirror to check her coiffure.

"You are angry?" she asked.

"An understatement."

She turned to look at him. "Because I introduced myself to your little ward? It was bound to happen sooner or later. I travel in the highest circles."

"Not quite, and certainly not in the circles that I expect my ward to travel in. And you may drop the act. You know very well I am not angry merely because you introduced yourself."

Clarendra lost her temper then. "You are deluding yourself, not me. It is very unlikely that she will find acceptance among the high sticklers."

"Certainly not if you mean to go about dropping the sort of broad hints you did today to all the gossip mongers."

"I do not need to!" she snapped.

"Then you will not feel compelled to," he retorted, keeping his voice even with an effort.

"I collect you mean that I am supposed to play stupid when I am asked?"

"You do it so well."

She glared at him, but fought a round with her temper. Finally, she managed a placating smile. Moving toward him seductively, she looped her arms around his neck. "Then I will behave as empty headed as you like. Let's not fight about the vacuous little chit. I far prefer making love with you."

Sebastian disentangled himself from her arms and set her away from him. "I am honor bound as Kathryn's guardian to protect her. How busy have you been Clarendra? For I must tell you that it did not escape my notice that my ward received no less than three cuts direct on our little outing, or that she was ogled by every rake we passed. Ordinarily, I might have thought little of it since she has not yet been introduced, and the fact is that she is a beauty and could not help but draw attention from every red blooded male about town, but I can not help but suspect there is a connection between your vicious comments to Kathryn and the other incidents."

Clarendra flounced away and settled herself on the settee. "You have a nasty suspicious mind, Sebastian! And, what's more, I can not think what you might mean by saying I spoke viciously to her."

"She might not have noticed since she doesn't know you. But you can not think to try that on me, not when you have known about my ward for weeks."

"It slipped my mind that she was Dermot's girl!" Clarendra snapped.

Sebastian's eyes narrowed. "You have been busy, have you not? Making certain that Kathryn will find all doors closed to her save those of the wilder set that you travel in? Where she is far more likely to be offered insult than matrimony. I am confused about your reasoning, Clarendra--if, in fact, reasoning even entered into your little game. If you wished to be rid of her, the simplest thing would have been to have not interfered with my attempts to settle her suitably. Or perhaps you have some reason to wish me dead?"

Clarendra whitened. "How could you say such a thing! You know I do not. I love you!"

A muscle in his jaw worked as he ground his teeth. "Exactly how many duels do you think I may have to fight because of your malicious interference? And how many do you think I can come through unscathed? Spare me your affections, Clarendra. I may live longer. I will send my man around to collect my belongings," he said tightly, turning on his heel and striding from her parlor.

\* \* \* \*

"It is far worse than I had thought, and you know I am not an optimist," Lady Linden said testily. "I am worn out from beating the bushes for suitable invitations and have only a handful to show for it, and those only because I bullied my friends for them."

Kathryn felt a wave of nausea wash over her that drained the blood from her face. Rage was part of it, for she was furious that she had already been judged and convicted when she had done nothing at all to earn the censure of the ton beyond being Dermot's daughter. Guilt was a part of it, as well, for she had delighted in tormenting Sebastian with her outrageous remarks and now she saw that he had problems enough without the added anxiety that she had not the wit to know when she might speak her mind and when she could not.

She saw when she risked a glance at him that he was studying her, his gaze brooding and she reddened guiltily, feeling her stomach take a dive toward her toes.

He must deeply regret the task he had taken upon himself and she didn't blame him at all.

"I am--so sorry to be so much trouble to the two of you," she managed to say finally. "Perhaps we should simply give up the notion altogether? I would not mind at all. Truly, I wouldn't. I am not really accustomed to socializing and although I suppose

it would be enjoyable under better circumstances, I am not likely to miss what I have not experienced.”

Lady Amelia’s face darkened. “That is a very sweet sentiment, Kathryn, but I am not about to have my guns spiked so easily! And I believe you have too much spine to simply run away as if you fear the old dragons!”

Kathryn was surprised that Amelia seemed determined now to battle for her when she had been so reluctant to be dragged into the business to start with. “I am not the least worried about it for myself,” she assured Lady Linden. “They can not hurt me with their prejudice, for I don’t care a whit for any of them. I only thought that if it will make you and Lord Huntington uncomfortable then it is not worth it to me, for I am very fond of both of you.”

That was not strictly true in Lady Linden’s case, but she knew better than to voice her fondness for Sebastian.

“That is thoughtful of you, Kat, but completely unacceptable. If you allow them to think they have routed you, you will find it even harder to find acceptance the next time and you could end up a spinster.”

Kathryn shrugged, but she didn’t look at Sebastian. “I suppose you will think me strange, but I am not particularly fearful of becoming a spinster, either. Der--Papa has set me up quite well. I have no need to marry unless I want to, and I am not at all certain that I will meet anyone who will be able to convince me that I want to wed.”

Amelia and Sebastian exchanged a pregnant glance. “Nonsense!” Amelia said dismissively. “Of course you wish to be wed! Every young woman wants the chance to have a family of her own and it would be a great tragedy if you were denied that opportunity.”

Kathryn supposed it would, though she found it difficult to imagine herself as a mother, and she could not help but feel that it would be irresponsible of her and grossly unfair to bear children who would have to contend with what she had had to. Perhaps they would not have to if she wed and behaved with boring respectability, but how could she know that until or unless she did? And then it would be too late for regrets.

“Actually, I believe I would rather go adventuring like Dermot,” she said finally. “When I am older, I would be able to do so.”

“I always thought that I would,” Amelia said almost enviously. “But, alas, you were born a female, as I was, and it is simply not done. It is far too dangerous for a woman to travel abroad. If you were an eyesore then there might be some possibility of it, but you are not. The temptation to prey upon a lovely young woman like yourself would simply be too great for many men to ignore and then things would become most unpleasant.”

“We will continue as planned,” Sebastian said thoughtfully. “Except that both Amelia and I will bear you company to act as buffer when you go out. You may or may not be accepted anyway, but at least we can be certain that you will be far less likely to be offered insult if I make it abundantly clear that I take my responsibilities as your guardian seriously. We will muddle through the remainder of the season and remove to the country when everyone else does and then we will decide what is best to do.”

## Chapter Nine

Kathryn had begun to think Sebastian might have forgotten about the ‘discussion’ he had promised. In truth, after she had heard what Amelia had to say about her season, she had almost forgotten it herself. She realized immediately when she was called to speak with him in his study, however, that he had certainly not forgotten.

When he had seated her in a chair facing his desk, he propped one hip upon the edge of the desk and studied her assessingly, his arms folded over his chest. “I am not easily shocked.”

Kathryn eyed him warily, knowing what was coming.

“I hope you will explain the comments you made to me the other day when we were out driving.”

She knew very well which comments he was referring to, but she decided to pretend she didn’t. “Which comments?”

He gave her a look, but she could see he was holding onto his patience only with an effort now. “I believe it was a reference to your--uh--skills as an equestrian.”

Kathryn bit her lip and studied her hands as wholly inappropriate amusement filled her. “Oh--that.”

“Yes, that,” he said tightly. “That is just the sort of remark that would totally demolish every effort we might make to protect your reputation, to say nothing of provoking the sort of interest that you would not like since it could easily be taken as a challenge.”

“And you think, because I said it to you that I am likely to repeat it in the presence of others?”

“Aren’t you?”

“No. I only said it to vex you.”

“You succeeded admirably,” he said dryly. “So, now you are saying that you would not consider such a thing? I have to wonder why it would even occur to you to make such a remark unless you have been brought to believe such a thing by your completely unorthodox upbringing.”

Honesty? Or should she tell him what he wanted to hear? “I have enough wit to know when I may speak freely and when I can not,” she hedged.

“Of your opinions? Why doesn’t that comfort me?”

“I will do my best to behave just as I ought,” Kathryn promised.

He smiled faintly. “Somehow that doesn’t comfort me much either. I do not know what to make of you, Kat, except that I have begun to think you are every inch your father’s daughter--the appearance of an angel and the disposition of a devil.”

Kathryn’s brows rose. “You think I have a very bad temper?”

He shook his head slowly. “No, I don’t, but I think you would try the patience of a saint, and I am certainly no saint.”

She smiled at him. "I don't think I would particularly like you if you were. Whatever you may think of me, I love Dermot dearly and I think I am more--comfortable around sinners than saints."

His expression turned wry. "That may be just as well, since I fear it will be no easy task to be allowed to rub elbows with the saints--especially given your penchant for saying some of the most outrageous things."

Kathryn studied her hands. "You--disapprove of me as much as everyone else."

"I did not say that."

"You did not have to."

He let out an impatient breath. "You do not know me half as well as you seem to think that you do," he said irritably.

Kathryn met his gaze. "I know you better than you know yourself," she said evenly, getting to her feet and moving closer to him. "You are drawn to me and repelled at the same time and for the same reason, because, like Dermot, you have spent your life flouting conventions and yet, at heart, you are just as bound by them as everyone else you know. A good woman, the kind you would consider marrying, is ignorant, clay to be molded as you see fit. A bad woman is the one you want in your bed, the woman who can fulfill your desires and your fantasies--but you distrust this sort of woman because you fear that she is too much like you--that she will loose interest and look around for someone new--and that is not something the male ego can bear.

"And I make you more uneasy than even that because I do not fit neatly into your concept of good and evil. I know far more than you think I should and you can not quite decide whether it is only that I have heard more than I should or that I have done things no well brought up young lady would do.

"That is what you meant when you questioned me about my familiarity with Giles, wasn't it? And it made you all the more uncomfortable because instead of denying it angrily--as you thought I should--I teased you instead.

"Well, I am sorry that I have made you uncomfortable, Sebastian, but I can not change what I am. You will have to accept me as I am, or not. I have promised to do my best not to cause you any more problems than I already have. I can do no more than promise to try, for, as you well know, I am not a well brought young lady. I am Dermot's daughter, and I not only do not regret that, I feel no shame at all, so you may make of that what you like."

To her surprise, he smiled faintly. "I do not believe that I have done half so much thinking as that since you came into my life, Kitten. But I can say for certain that you are wrong in one respect. I am not repelled by you in the least, not in any respect. Quite the opposite, more's the pity for the sake of my peace of mind."

It was not until she had left that it dawned upon Sebastian that Katherine had not denied her extremely unconventional viewpoint of selecting a husband to suit her tastes ... or rather a stallion. She had told him she had said it to vex him, but she had also said that she knew better than to voice her opinion around others, which, he realized belatedly sounded far more like an admission than a denial.

Groaning, he pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling a headache coming on. When several minutes of intense concentration failed to eradicate either the image Katherine had emblazoned in his mind or calmed the beast in his trousers that had bounced up to greet her like a happy puppy when she had approached him, he moved to

the sideboard to pour himself a drink. After studying the finger of bourbon he had poured for himself for several moments while he wrestled with the temptation to go ahead and fill it to the brim, he set the decanter down with deliberation and pushed the stopper back into the neck of the bottle with the reflection that he could not afford to addle what little wit remained to him with liquor.

Kathryn Marshall was undoubtedly a devil, he thought morosely as he downed the drink, sent to torment him for all his past misdeeds, cunningly wrought in the form of divinity, but a devil nonetheless, and he very much feared she was going to be the death of him. One glance from those beautiful blue eyes of hers was enough to make his cock hard enough to drive nails and fry his brain. If he did not die of heart failure from having every ounce of blood in his body focused almost constantly in his groin, some other randy buck was going to put a bullet in him on the dueling field. "Dermot, you sod," he muttered through gritted teeth. "For my sake, I hope to hell you are dead, because I am very much afraid that I will not be able to restrain myself from choking the life out of you if I see your face again! And then I will end up on the gallows!"

"Sebastian!" Amelia's voice hit him like a douse of icy water from the door of his study. "What are you muttering about? We are ready to go."

Sebastian closed his eyes in relief and thanksgiving. Never had a woman's voice been more diabolically modulated to deflate one's manhood, and he wondered a little viciously if that accounted for Amelia's barrenness. He could not imagine the poor sod she had wed being able to hold on to his erection long enough to plow her furrows with her uttering commands and directions in his ear.

Happily, the thought amused him and, once more in full possession of both his composure and his dignity, he was able to usher the two women into the waiting carriage with a reasonable amount of aplomb. It did not last.

"I am told that is a sign of aging," Amelia announced complacently when they had settled for the ride to their destination.

Sebastian slid his elder sister a narrow eyed glance. "I'll bite, Meally. What?"

Amelia gave him a cold stare, which did not surprise him in the least since she had always detested the 'pet' name he had concocted for her. "Talking to oneself," she responded coolly.

He was severely tempted to point out that she was his elder by five years and would certainly know more about it than he did, but since he happened to glance at Kathryn at that moment and noticed that she was glancing worriedly between him and Amelia, he contained his ill humor with an effort.

"You are looking enchanting tonight, Kitten," he said instead with only a slightly forced smile.

She did not, in point of fact, look fetching at all. The thing she was wearing was ghastly and he was not certain whether it was a reflection of Kathryn's lamentable taste, or Amelia's. It dawned upon him after a moment, however, that this, undoubtedly, was a part of the new wardrobe that had been arriving for the past several days.

Kathryn looked down at the gown doubtfully, as well she might. "You think so?"

Amelia made an impatient sound. "The correct response, my dear, is to smile and say, 'thank you, my lord'. It is very unbecoming to fish for more compliments when you have already been given one, besides giving the impression that you lack confidence. And that is not something you want to project, Kathryn. Take my word for it."

Kathryn's eyes were dancing with amusement when she tilted her head and slid Sebastian a glance from beneath her lashes, a Mona Lisa smile playing about her lips. "Thank you, my lord," she repeated dutifully.

If she had punched him in the gut she could not have more effectively knocked the breath out of him. He swallowed with an effort, resisting the urge to adjust the cravat that, incomprehensibly, felt as if it had tightened around his throat like a noose.

Inwardly, he groaned, reflecting that Amelia had wasted her time and Dermot's money trying to hide Kathryn's charms, for her face and figure were only a part of it. She was a natural born coquette, and if she had been dressed in sackcloth there would not be a man at the party they were heading for that noticed it or cared even if he did. They would be falling over themselves to catch her notice. They would be fortunate indeed if there was no riot, and the worst of it was that he could not in good conscience abandon her to his sister and escape to a more comfortable distance--like the continent.

Or the Americas, like that bleeding sod, Dermot, bloody coward that he was, he thought, justifiably incensed that he had been trapped into a situation that was rapidly barreling out of control.

Tamping his irritation with an effort, he glared out the carriage window, trying to convince himself that he was wrong. For whatever reason, he was susceptible to Kathryn and no amount of calling her 'Kitten' as if she was merely an adorable child enabled him to think of her that way. At least, not when he was looking directly at her and not when she was in his immediate vicinity ... or in the same damned room.

His worst fears were realized before they even managed to enter the residence where the party was being held. The doorman, who hurried down the steps to help them alight just as Sebastian helped Kathryn from the carriage, was felled by the brilliance of her smile when she looked up in delighted anticipation at the lighted house from which the clear strains of music and conversation emanated. Dazzled, he missed the next step and slid the remainder of the way down the stairs on his ass, taking out a passing footman who had come to an abrupt halt when he caught sight of her as if he had just slammed into a brick wall.

"Mercy!" Kathryn exclaimed in dismay.

Sebastian glanced down at the tangled bodies beside his carriage without a great deal of sympathy since they had managed to startle his horses and his driver was having the devil of a time holding them while Amelia stepped from the carriage. "Never mind, my dear! I expect they will be more careful about clearing the snow and ice from the steps next time!" she said bracingly, hooking her arm through Kathryn's and leading her away with grim determination.

"They could've been hurt," Kathryn said, worriedly glancing back over her shoulder.

"Stout breed, servants," Sebastian assured her, tucking her hand into the crook of his arm as he moved to her other side. "I am certain they are perfectly fine beyond the wound to their dignity, which you are not helping."

Kathryn glanced up at Sebastian uncomfortably. "I did not mean to embarrass them."

"Of course not," Amelia assured her. "You are very tender hearted to be concerned, which is most becoming, but I am sure it is unnecessary."

“Quite right,” Sebastian agreed, “for I am entirely convinced that they only wish to die quietly without drawing more attention to themselves. I am certain I would, in any event.”

Kathryn threw him a laughing glance. “You are so droll, my lord!”

“Do not pander to his ego,” Amelia said coolly. “He is quite abominably spoiled by female attention as it is.”

Sebastian sent her a sardonic glance but refrained from comment.

Their welcome was far from warm, but since the receiving line had already begun to break up, the gauntlet was a short one, consisting only of Lady Hollyewell, who was always agreeable, her eldest son, who had only ascended to his father’s honors three years previously and was generally described most kindly as a ‘pompous ass’, and her eldest daughter, Mrs. John Smythe, who was never more than coldly civil to anyone.

“How delightful that you could come, dear Amelia!” Mrs. Smythe managed in a wooden tone, nodding regally when she was introduced to Kathryn and bestowing a slightly warmer smile on Sebastian.

Lord Hollyewell unbent sufficiently to form his lips in a chilly smile for the three of them and murmured everything that was required, and his mother, Lady Hollyewell gushed enthusiastically about what a delight it must be for Amelia to sponsor such a lovely young lady when she was unlikely to have the opportunity otherwise.

Amelia smiled thinly at the reference to her childlessness and agreed that it was.

Sebastian relaxed fractionally when Lady Hollyewell insisted upon taking Kathryn to introduce her to some of the ‘young people’ in attendance and led her away.

“At least we made it past the door without being tossed out on our ... ear,” he murmured to Amelia as they watched Kathryn and Lady Hollyewell weaving through the crowd of guests.

“The evening is young yet,” Amelia retorted morosely. “Go! Have a drink for both of us.”

Sebastian smiled faintly. “I believe I will try to keep my wits about me if it’s all the same to you.”

Amelia glanced up at him. “This unnerves me.”

“You are so droll, Amelia!” Sebastian murmured and sauntered off to mingle.

Dragging in a bracing breath, Amelia headed out to work the crowd on the opposite side of the room. Two hours later they met up again at the edge of the dance floor watching as Kathryn and a young man she had met that evening performed a country dance. Sebastian frowned in displeasure when he spied her. “Did you permit her to dance?”

Amelia shrugged. “I thought a dance or two could not hurt.”

“Unless it starts a riot,” Sebastian said dryly, surveying the men watching her from the sidelines. “I count six and that is only the most obvious--the glassy eyed ones that have the air of huntsman who have just spied a doe in the wood.”

“Ah,” Amelia retorted, nodding. “That sort of vacuous look you get on your face whenever you spy Kathryn?”

Feeling his color heighten, Sebastian wisely decided to ignore her sarcasm. “At least they are not all rakes,” he commented instead.



“Yes, there is that,” Amelia agreed. “But then again, aside for yourself, I only count four at the party and poor Sir Charles is getting on now and has a paunch besides and I am fairly certain Kathryn could outrun him without too much difficulty.”

“Egad!” Sebastian growled indignantly. “The man is scarcely ten years my senior!”

Amelia feigned surprise. “How sad that dissipation ages one beyond one’s years. There but for the grace of God, Sebastian.”

He noticed when he slid her a cold glare that she was looking very pleased with herself. “Under other circumstances, I would hesitate to point it out, but he is far closer to your age than mine, Meally.”

She shrugged. “I, however, have not lived a life of debauchery, and I am told I look far younger than my three and thirty years.”

“Careful, Meally!” Sebastian murmured. “I shall meet you coming back and then people will begin to wonder at your grasp of mathematics.”

Deciding to ignore the thinly veiled comment about her little white lie, for she had only fudged it a little, she focused on Kathryn as she left the dance floor with her partner. “She has behaved very well tonight. I am pleased with her.”

Kathryn was flushed and breathless when she reached them. “I enjoyed that very much, thank you, Mr. Tomlinson.”

“The pleasure was mine,” he stammered, bowing over her hand.

He did not release it until he looked up and encountered a deadly glance from Lord Huntington.

“Will I be seeing you at the Gatewood soiree tomorrow?”

Kathryn glanced at Amelia questioningly.

Amelia shook her head fractionally. “I can not say for certain,” she answered for Kathryn. “I can not recall at the moment what we have committed ourselves to, but I am quite certain that the two of you will have the chance to renew your acquaintance before long. We must take our leave now, Kathryn.”

Mr. Tomlinson looked somewhat put out but bid them a polite good evening and the threesome made their way outside once more.

Kathryn sighed happily when they were seated in the carriage once more. “Thank you! I enjoyed that. It was not at all like I had expected. Everyone I met was very pleasant.”

Amelia and Sebastian exchanged a speaking glance.

“I am glad you enjoyed yourself, my dear,” Amelia said after a moment. “I was very pleased with your behavior--reserved, but not shy.”

Kathryn uttered a husky chuckle. “I was only reserved because I was fearful that I would say something I ought not if I spoke, and of course, because of De--papa. I am not the least shy.”

Sebastian sent her a speculative glance, recalling very distinctly that that had been his first impression--that she was shy. A lamb to the slaughter, he thought irritably, except in this case he very much feared the lamb was a wolf.

He could scarcely accuse her of setting out to deceive him, however. For one, it was not a pretense, at least not a conscious one that he could tell. It was that angelic face of hers that confused the unwary, and she could scarcely be blamed for looking far more sweet and innocent than she actually was.

For another, he had watched her carefully throughout the evening and he could not, as much as it annoyed him, tell that she behaved any differently toward him than she did with any of the other men. And he would look like a fool, and feel worse, if he suggested that he suspected she had set her cap for him and she disabused him of the notion.

Not that she wasn't sweet and he sincerely hoped she was innocent. For if she was not he was going to lose his mind completely. It was difficult enough to manage as it was, but he sincerely trusted that he would overcome his difficulties once he had had time to accustom himself to her--in a dozen years or so. If she took the notion to test him, he was a dead man, for he was reasonably certain that he would fail any test she threw at him with flying colors.

## Chapter Ten

"He did not seem the least perturbed that I caught the interest of several very attractive men at the party," Kathryn informed Lynette almost accusingly.

Lynette gave her a look of sympathy. "Oh dear! That is not a good sign."

Kathryn had feared that it wasn't, but Lynette's confirmation made her more miserable than she had been. "It is because he does not care at all, isn't it? For if he had any interest in me himself, he would at least have felt ... challenged, wouldn't he?"

"One would think so. Did any of these handsome young men catch your interest?"

Kathryn thought it over but she could not think of a single one that made her breathless with excitement the way Lord Huntington did only by glancing at her with mild interest.

Almost as if her thoughts had conjured him, she heard his tread in the hallway beyond the small parlor where she and Lynette had retired with their needlework--or rather Lynette had. Kathryn had scarcely touched her own. "I thought Lord Stanwyke was most handsome and very charming," she said in a confidential way that she knew was perfectly audible.

"You will refrain, however, from encouraging him," Sebastian said coolly, coming into the room just then.

"Oh?" Kathryn asked artlessly. "Is he married? I had understood that he was not."

He frowned, moving to stand before the hearth. "He is a budding young rake and not likely to offer you an honorable proposition," he said irritably.

"But ...." Kathryn broke off, frowning thoughtfully. "Would an older rake be better, you think?"

His lips flattened. "A reputable young man would be better," he said tartly.

Kathryn focused on her needlework, mostly picking out the stitches she had gotten wrong because she was not paying attention when she had placed them. "If you mean a stick in the mud like Lord Hollyewell, then I am not at all certain that I want a reputable young man."

"The objective, however, is marriage--and we can not reasonably expect to achieve that goal if you mean to encourage rakes of Lord Stanwyke's ilk."

"Mr. Smythe seemed pleasant enough," she murmured after a moment.

"Good God! He is married!"

Kathryn threw him an amused glance. "I meant Mr. Lawrence Smythe."

"Oh," Sebastian said, disconcerted. He recovered quickly. "He is too old, a widower, besides being more of a stick in the mud than Hollyewell."

Kathryn's brows knit thoughtfully. "He did not seem that old to me."

"Feeling his oats, no doubt," Sebastian muttered. "The old reprobate."

"I beg your pardon?" Kathryn asked, sending him a curious glance although she had heard him quite well.

“Nothing,” he muttered. “Mr. Tomlinson seemed personable enough.”

Kathryn pretended to think it over. “I enjoyed dancing with him,” she said tentatively.

“On the other hand, he smells of the trade to me. Better not set your cap in his direction until I have had the opportunity to check him out.”

Biting her lip, Kathryn ducked her head as if she was peering closely at her needlework.

Amelia bustled into the parlor, looking very pleased. “We have received more invitations! A half dozen at the very least!” she announced. “It is not much, to be sure, but better than I dared hope!”

“Good!” Lord Huntington said briskly. “For Kat did not meet anyone of any interest last evening.”

“Actually,” Kathryn said. “I thought Sir Jonathan Langly was particularly agreeable. Very dashing in his uniform and he has the most beautiful green eyes!”

“Cannon fodder,” Sebastian pronounced flatly. “Unless you’re looking to be a young widow, or have an interest in following the drum, you should not set your heart on a military man.”

“What a thing to say!” Amelia exclaimed.

“But true. In any case, he would not have pursued a career in the army if he was not a younger son. He can not be well set up.”

Amelia shrugged. “I can not be certain of that, but I have not heard that he is hanging out for a rich wife. In any case, Dermot did very well by Kathryn and it is not something she need be particularly concerned about. Naturally, we do not want to encourage anyone who is hanging out for a rich wife, but we can not dismiss him out of hand if he has caught Kathryn’s interest.”

Sebastian’s lips tightened. “I am off to my club. I will leave you ladies to discuss the merits of the young bucks.”

“You are to take us to the theater tonight,” Amelia reminded him as he strode to the door.

He paused and turned as he reached the door. “I have not forgotten,” he said, flicking a glance at Kathryn before he quit the room.

Amelia frowned thoughtfully when she heard the front door slam behind him. “He seemed a bit put out,” she murmured. “Though I am at a loss to know why! It was his suggestion that we go to the theater, after all!”

Kathryn was so pleased with herself that she had a very hard time containing it. “I think, perhaps, that he might have a touch of headache, for he did go back out again last evening after he had escorted us home,” she said demurely.

Amelia thought it over. “He is up very early, now that you bring it to mind. I am sure you are right. Very likely he was up much of the night, which is not at all uncommon, and then rose early and that is why he seemed disagreeable. I can not help but think, though, that he did not seem particularly pleased about our efforts,” she said testily, “which only goes to show that he has no appreciation for the difficulty of these things.”

“Men never do,” Kathryn murmured sympathetically. “It is because they never do this sort of thing, I am certain, for they are accustomed to simply telling someone else to get it done and going off to enjoy themselves and coming back to discover it has been

done. Papa was always doing just such and he would be very disagreeable if he returned and it had not been done as if it needed only a magic wand waved over it.

"I think, too, that Lord Huntington had convinced himself that he had only to trot me out at one party and put me through my paces and he would immediately have an offer so that he could discharge his duties at once and go about his business."

Amelia looked her over with a mixture of surprise and disapproval. "I see that you have picked up 'papa's' penchant for describing everything in the vernacular of the horse set. I have always found it particularly distasteful to be equated with a mare myself, and although I can not help but appreciate both your insight and your sensibility, which I find a pleasant surprise given your youth, I do not think you should encourage such thinking in others by speaking of it so off handedly. It does not disturb you at all?"

Kathryn thought it over and finally shrugged. "One must select, after all. It is not as if I am not judging their merits at the same time--although I suppose they do not think of it that way, for they are certain, are they not, that they are the ones doing the choosing?"

Amelia permitted herself a smile. "I always resented that I had not been born a man," she said after a moment, "for I could not think that I was at all handy using female wiles to get what I wanted. I was very impatient, for I would have far preferred to simply do as men do and go straight to the point."

"It is certainly frustrating at times," Kathryn admitted. "But it can be very effective and just as rewarding. It is not as if they always have their way, is it?" Amusement danced in her eyes. "Especially when they can not be certain, once they have gotten their way, whether it was their idea to begin with or if they were subtly convinced that it was what they wanted when it had not in fact occurred to them until it was placed in their mind."

Amelia chuckled, but she looked more than a little horrified, as well. "Kathryn Marshall! I do not know whether to be more amazed and impressed, or horrified to discover you are so wise beyond your years. Dare I ask how you came to be so knowledgeable and adept at such things when I know very well that you can not have had many opportunities, if any, to practice your wiles?"

"I am a very good observer," Kathryn said off handedly.

Amelia reddened. "Say no more! I knew I did not want to know. You will not mention this to anyone else, I feel sure, for it will only provide fodder for the gossip mongers. In any case, the element of surprise can not be discounted as a formidable weapon. You have mastered the 'innocent as the driven snow' and you should take full advantage of it, for whoever catches your eye will certainly fall before he even realizes he is under siege."

Kathryn smiled. "I had thought that that was by far the best tactic," she admitted, "but it is always comforting to have the approval of someone of experience and wisdom such as yourself. For learning something through observation is never quite the same as trying to put it into practice."

\* \* \* \*

Kathryn could not help but be excited about going to the theater. She knew that it was considered bad form to display excessive enthusiasm about such things, besides making it evident that she was unsophisticated and 'countrified' and she did her best to behave as expected, but she could not entirely quell her excitement. Dermot had spoken

to her often about visits to the theater and described it to her as best he could, but that had only wetted her appetite to actually see it and experience the theater.

Beyond the special treat of a new, exciting experience, was the fact that Lord Huntington would be escorting her and Amelia and she would be able to spend the whole evening in his company.

The only cloud on her horizon was the fact that Lynette would not be allowed to go. It made her feel horribly guilty that she was to get such a special treat and Lynette would have to stay home alone.

Lynette chuckled at her long face, smiling at her affectionately. "You will think me very bad, I am sure, but I do not mind in the least for, as it happens, Mr. Meeks has the evening off and he has kindly invited me to join him."

Kathryn stared at Lynette blankly for several moments as that slowly sank in. "Lynette!" she exclaimed teasingly. "You have been pitching woo with the butler? You must tell me all about it!"

"On no account!" Sebastian said from the doorway. "Kat, if I may have a word with you in my study?"

Kathryn glanced at him guiltily. "Yes, my lord," she responded, instantly subdued. Exchanging a questioning glance with Lynette, as if searching for some clue of what she had now done wrong--which she was--she followed him meekly to his study and settled on the edge of the chair he indicated. Looking up at him with wide-eyed anxiety, she cudged her brain for what transgression he might have gotten wind of, but she had scarcely been out of the house. She had not had the opportunity to do anything wrong that she knew of.

He was angry, though. She could see that, for his eyes were glittering with it, and she wondered if she was not to get her treat of going to the theater after all.

"Pitching woo?" he demanded tightly.

Kathryn blinked, a little stunned to discover the cause of his anger. She was either going to have to be more careful about what she said, or she was going to have to remember to listen for his tread. "It is not called that?" she asked hesitantly.

"It is not discussed by young ladies with any claim of good breeding, especially not with ser--companions."

Kathryn abruptly felt her own anger surge to the surface. He had recovered his slip, but she knew he was angrier that she had been speaking so familiarly with someone he felt was beneath her than because of the subject. She thought that was it, at any rate, and she did not appreciate his attitude toward Lynette. "How would you know?"

She caught him off guard. "What?"

"As I understand it, you eschew the company of well brought up young ladies as if they have some disease which you fear you will contract. Your preference seems to be the society of ladies of doubtful virtue, so I can not think where you might have come by any conclusions on what proper young ladies do or do not discuss."

His face hardened, his eyes narrowing in a way that sent a quiver of uneasiness through Kathryn. Unfortunately, she was too angry by now, having resurrected her displeasure about his mistress, to pay any heed to the need for caution.

"You forget yourself. What I do is not your affair," he said coldly.

“And of no interest to me, either,” she lied coolly, feeling a good deal of satisfaction that he looked somewhat taken aback. “I was merely pointing out that you would have no way of knowing proper behavior.”

“You obviously do not either or you would not be asking Lynette for the particulars in her affair with my butler! I may, as you pointed out, not know much about proper young ladies, but I am entirely certain they do not discuss ‘pitching woo’ since it is low bred vernacular in the first place, and references, moreover, certain ... uh ... behavior that an innocent would have no knowledge of.”

Kathryn studied him frankly for several moments and finally got to her feet. “I beg your pardon, then. I will strive to make certain that the door is closed and no one is within hearing when I engage in such discussions in the future. It is only that I was caught off guard by her announcement and quite pleased, actually.”

He caught her arm, dragging her to a halt.

She turned back to look up at him questioningly.

His eyes narrowed. “Do not give me that look of innocence, Kitten. You know very well that that was only a part of the reason for my anger.”

She did, but she had entertained some hope that he would be pacified with her apology and a promise to be more careful in future that she was not overheard. She was not ready to concede complete defeat, however, and merely looked at him blankly, waiting for him to enlighten her on the precise points of his anger. There was no point, after all, in apologizing for something he was not angry about just now, because that would only remind him of things he might have forgotten in his anger. “What was the other part?” she prompted.

For a moment she thought she saw a hint of amusement in his eyes. It vanished so quickly, however, that she was not entirely certain she had seen it and she knew it was not safe to let down her guard.

“Where did you hear such lewd language?” he demanded after a moment.

“From Dermot,” she responded promptly.

He looked so pained and distressed that she could not resist the impulse to stroke his hard cheek soothingly. “I can not un-know what I know, or un-see what I have seen, Sebastian,” she said quietly. “Do not distress yourself. I will promise to be more careful.”

His eyes when he met her gaze again were almost feverish with some untamed emotion. It sent such a flood of heated anticipation through her that she caught her breath. He swallowed thickly. “Do not test me, little girl,” he growled, his voice vibrating with dangerous emotions. “You may find that you are not as prepared for the consequences as you believe.”

Stung, she dropped her hand. She knew she should leave well enough alone, that she had pushed him much further than she had intended as it was, but it hurt and her anger subverted her common sense. “I have seen the consequences,” she said evenly. “Your perception of me is skewed. I am not a little girl, whatever you may prefer to think, and a man’s passions hold no terror for me.”

Especially not his, but she was wise enough, despite her anger, to keep that to herself.

His hand settled abruptly on her waist, dragging her closer. Her eyes widened, not in fear, but surprise at the discovery that he was hard, for he very deliberately brought

her up against his erection. She gazed up at him unflinchingly for all that, waiting a little breathlessly to see if he would press the matter, struggling only against the weakness that suffused her, the heated expectation that filled her.

For she knew those sensations well, knew what it was her body was craving. She had felt it each time she had seen him with another woman, imagining herself in that woman's place, striving to imagine what it must feel like. She wanted to know, not simply imagine it as she had done for years.

His gaze dropped from hers and focused on her lips and she knew he was thinking about kissing her. Her lips parted in invitation and breathless anticipation, tingling beneath his gaze as if she could already feel his touch even before he dipped his head toward hers. She inhaled sharply as she felt the heated brush of his harsh sigh against her lips. The taste of him was heavenly and it sent a dizzying rush through her.

Still, he hesitated and she had to fight the urge to lift her lips to his and close the slight distance that still separated them.



## Chapter Eleven

Sebastian dragged in a shuddering breath, abruptly withdrawing, releasing her, almost thrusting her away in his need to put some distance between them before he could yield to the nearly overwhelming urge to pull her back and finish what he had started. “You are bold. I will give you that,” he muttered harshly. “But I have not completely lost my mind.”

He was not, unfortunately, convinced of it. His body was still raging against his attack of conscience, his mind muddled with the intoxicant of fiery, liquid desire that pounded through him as corrosively as acid. He thought that he had had an agenda beyond the one screaming through him in demand that he appease it. But he could not recall, at the moment, what that might have been for his mind was filled instead with the feel of her soft curves melded against his, the catch in her breath, her response to him.

That was it, he realized abruptly! He had meant to teach her a lesson, to frighten some sense into her. He had bloody well done a hell of a job of it!

He had certainly not intended to torment himself any further when he was already suffering the tortures of the damned because he wanted her so badly he could taste it. He had definitely not intended to actually kiss her, but his mouth and throat were still parched for the taste he had so nearly taken.

Christ! He was mad! That had been unforgivably stupid!

He glared at her resentfully, feeling the suspicion arise within him that he had, somehow, been duped. He was not currently in possession of enough of his faculties to figure out how, however.

Kathryn stared at him in disappointment and confusion as he pushed her away. It took an effort to gather her wits about her, to tamp the frustration and make sense of what had just happened. His comments tumbled about in her mind for several moments before the meaning congealed. When it did, anger resurfaced.

He had been testing her, the swine?

Laboring under some sort of misguided attempt to teach her a lesson, she wondered?

He had expected, she realized, for her to behave with maidenly confusion and fright and he was angry with her because she had not and deeply suspicious of why she had not.

It occurred to her abruptly, and with a sinking sense of dismay, that she had made a serious error in judgment, mostly because she had been angry before and had not kept her head. Men, Dermot had told her more than once, were prone to believe that a woman who would welcome their advances would welcome any man’s advances. When she had demanded to know why, he had thought it over and said that it was because they would. It seemed completely unreasonable to her, particularly given the male ego, but, as he had pointed out, people, male or female, were inclined to endow others with their own motivations. They could hardly be blamed for it when it was the only thing they had to use to judge others.

The worst of it was she could not tell him that she had no interest in any other man, that she would not welcome their advances. He would not be likely to believe her even if she did, and if he did, then that would unravel her carefully laid plans.

It seemed a little late to execute her 'maidenly outrage', but, shrugging inwardly, she decided she had little to lose at this point and smacked him solidly on one cheek, wincing when she realized she had slapped him harder than she had intended.

He looked stunned for a moment. Slowly, he lifted a hand to his abused cheek, rubbing at the red marks she had left there ruefully. A mixture of anger and amusement glinted in his eyes. "That was slow in coming. Was that because I did not finish? Or because I was too forward?"

Kathryn bit her lip, fighting the temptation to smile back when she saw his lips twitch with suppressed humor. "It is because you had no business trying to kiss me at all!" she snapped. "That is what you were doing, isn't it?" she added in artful confusion.

It was a little too much, she realized at once. Suspicion flickered in his eyes. "Overdone?" she asked guilelessly, unable to resist.

"A touch," he said dryly, studying her as if really seeing her for the first time. "Now I do not know whether to kiss you silly, or turn you over my knee and paddle your backside. But I am sorely tempted to do both."

"You must do neither, for you would feel guilty either way," she said, leaning toward him and kissing the red mark on his cheek. "I am very sorry. I did not mean to slap you quite that hard. Does it hurt?"

"Not as much as ...." He broke off abruptly, clearing his throat. "Go now and get ready. You will not wish to miss the opening act, I am sure, though we may have trouble convincing Amelia to appear before the second for it is considered gauche and countrified to appear too eager for the play itself."

"You will not mind?"

He smiled faintly. "It will be a dead bore, but I will strive to contain my ennui for your benefit."

Amelia was very outdone, but she allowed Kathryn to bully her into rushing to reach the theater before the curtain came up on the first act. Even so, they had scarcely settled in their seats when the chandeliers were lowered, the light dimmed, and a hush fell over the audience. Enraptured by the music that swelled from the orchestra and the elaborate set that was revealed as the curtain rose, Kathryn sat mesmerized as the play began to unfold, feeling the world around her recede as she was caught up in the story the actors were depicting. It was not until the curtain descended on the first act that she became aware of her surroundings again. A little embarrassed that she had completely ignored her companions, she turned to look at Amelia and Sebastian. "That was quite something, was it not?"

Amelia looked a little surprised. "It makes far more sense when one watches it from the beginning. Who would have thought?"

Bending a sardonic glance at his sister, Sebastian stood. "Shall we walk a bit? Or would you two prefer to stay put to see who drops by the box to visit?"

"I am content to wait to see who comes," Amelia said at once.

Kathryn sent her a look of distress, reddening.

Amelia blinked. "On second thought, I believe I will walk. Come, Kathryn."

Sebastian favored Kathryn with an easy grin when he tucked her hand into the crook of his arm. She frowned at him and looked away, chagrined that he knew exactly why she wanted to take a walk, for he took them directly to the lady's retiring room.

"The very thing!" Amelia said when she spotted the sign. "Come, Kathryn, and let us check your hem. I am certain that I noticed it sagging just a bit."

Sebastian chuckled when Kathryn sent him a reproachful glance as she passed him on the way through the door. "I will wait for you down the hall a bit. Unless you would prefer that I fetch refreshment? A tall glass of lemonade, perhaps?"

Kathryn shut the door in his face.

Feeling better once she and Amelia had 'adjusted their hems', she looked up and down the hall expectantly when they emerged. Sebastian, she saw, had indeed stopped to wait down the hall, but he was no longer alone. Indignation swelled in her breast when she saw the way Lady Carlson was blatantly flirting with him.

"That creature," Amelia muttered. "I thought he had ...." She broke off abruptly and glanced guiltily in Kathryn's direction. "Let us return to the box," she said firmly, slipping her arm through Kathryn's and turning back the way they had come.

Kathryn was feeling downright ill with jealousy by the time they reached the box again, but she was not so lost to all sense that she failed to realize that any appearance of possessiveness would not be received well by Sebastian if he should notice it when he returned. Trying to calm herself, she focused on staring down at the people mingling in the 'pit' below with the laudable intention of appearing completely unaffected when Sebastian did return.

Providence smiled upon her for her eye was caught by Lynette, who was waving to her surreptitiously from below. A smile tugged at her lips. She had just lifted her hand to wave back when her wrist was caught in a firm grasp. "We do not wave at the young men ogling from the pit," Amelia said firmly.

By happy coincidence, that comment coincided with Sebastian's return to the box and she had the satisfaction of seeing his dark brows instantly descend in a scowl before he could prevent himself. It vanished almost as quickly as it had appeared, but his expression was uncompromising as he settled beside her instead of seating himself at the back of the box as he had during the first act.

Feeling immeasurably better that Sebastian had gotten a good dose of the same medicine she had tasted she was able to turn her attention to the stage once more as the curtain began to go up. It was hard to focus on the play, at first, for she was very conscious of Sebastian's nearness and his keen interest in the pit below, but within a few moments she became as wrapped up in the story as she had been throughout the first act and enjoyed it thoroughly despite the lingering sting of jealousy.

Her mind did not, in fact, return to her displeasure until Sebastian rose to take another stroll about the theater and it instantly leapt into her mind that he meant to seek the woman out again when he excused himself. She exchanged a look with Amelia. "It is very different than I expected," she said after a moment.

"How so?" Amelia asked curiously.

Kathryn smiled. "Der--Papa used to tell me about his visits to the theater, but I do not recall him mentioning the theatrics and that is the very best part."

“You only say that now because you have only begun to go about in society. Once you have made friends and acquaintances, you will have far more interest in seeing them than what is happening up on the stage.”

Kathryn was not certain she could agree, but a few minutes later a knock came on the door of the box and Lord Stanwyke arrived for a visit.

Contrary to what she had led Sebastian to believe, she had not found Lord Stanwyke of any particular interest. He might well be a ‘budding’ rake as Sebastian said, but he had not blossomed as yet in her estimation and she found his airs more annoying than intriguing. Nevertheless, it was enough that Sebastian had disapproved. She gave him a far warmer smile of welcome than she would have otherwise and thus once he had exchanged brief pleasantries with Amelia, he moved to settle next to her.

She made the mistake of giving him her hand to salute, and followed with a full minute of wrestling to get it back. She was not at all certain that he would have released it then except that several more visitors piled into the box, among them Mr. Tomlinson and Sir Jonathan Langly, both of whom were far more welcome. Unfortunately, by the time Lord Stanwyke took the hint and possessed himself of her hand once more to take his leave, the box had become so crowded that it was nigh impossible for anyone at the front to make their way to the back.

And it was into that general melee that Sebastian returned. Halting abruptly at the door when he discovered the small box was too crowded to admit anyone else, he was still taller than most everyone present and managed to witness the second tug of war between Kathryn and Lord Stanwyke over her hand.

For once, the incident was not of her manufacture. She had not expected that Lord Stanwyke would be so thick as to refuse, twice, to release her hand and she was far too busy trying to remove her hand from his grip without creating a scene to notice when Sebastian arrived. One look at his face, however, once the box had finally cleared and he resumed his seat, was enough to assure her that he had not only seen the by play, he was furiously angry about it and suspicious, moreover, that she had planned the whole thing only to annoy him.

She had welcomed Lord Stanwyke to annoy him, because she had hoped he might still be there when Sebastian returned from flirting with the woman she knew very well he had gone to see and she did not want to be sitting alone when he returned. But she had not expected then that the others would come and by the time she had realized that Sebastian would certainly not return to discover her languishing alone with Amelia in the box, it was too late.

She could not very well explain that to Sebastian, however, and she rather thought he would not be any more pleased if she admitted that she had only encouraged Lord Stanwyke’s attention to annoy him.

She missed the last act because she was so distracted by Lord Huntington’s seething anger beside her.

He scarcely waited until they were seated in the carriage for the return ride home before he blasted her with the icy anger that had been simmering in him since the curtain had gone up on the last act. “My memory is evidently failing me.”

Kathryn considered pretending she had no idea what he was talking about but after studying his face for a moment decided that would only provoke him more. “I did not encourage him,” she said meekly, refusing to glance in Amelia’s direction.

"I collect you refer to Lord Stanwyke?" Amelia asked. "I can not imagine what you expected either me or Kathryn to do when he came to call. In any case, it was a public place, and I was in the box the entire time."

Sebastian's gaze never left Kathryn's face and the longer he studied her the more guilty she felt, and the redder she became. "You will not encourage him to believe you return his interest."

A flicker of resentment swept over her that he had so blatantly flirted with his mistress in public and chastised her only for speaking to the man. She knew very well that she had encouraged him, however. And, moreover, Lord Stanwyke had not behaved in a very gentlemanly manner. That being the case, she decided that, in this particular instance, Sebastian was probably right in warning her to steer clear of the man. "No, my lord," she responded meekly.

He allowed the subject to drop, but she could tell he was still angry about it and it unnerved her even more when, instead of setting down with them once they reached Clermont Street, he bid them a good evening and left again.

"Whatever in the world occurred to put him into such a passion?" Amelia asked when they had disposed of their cloaks and settled in the parlor.

Kathryn shrugged. "I am not at all certain. He had told me that I should not encourage Lord Stanwyke to think I was interested in him because he was a budding rake."

Amelia's brows rose. "He is a late bloomer, then," she said dryly, "for he is nigh as old as Sebastian. Are you entirely certain he said budding?"

Kathryn frowned thoughtfully. "I thought that was what he said. Perhaps he said he was a bloody rake?"

Amelia's eyes widened, her head whipping toward the door in search of servants. "Very likely that is exactly what he said," she murmured after a moment, "but you will kindly not repeat that sort of thing even if Sebastian forgets himself and says it in your presence."

Kathryn nodded, but she was still trying to recall the conversation. "I am certain he said budding--budding young rake, for I asked him if an older rake would be better and he did not like that suggestion either."

"I am sure he would not," Amelia retorted, looking amused for a moment. "And you certainly should not, for the objective here is to see you married and a rake is not likely to offer it."

"Dermot said it was better for a man to get it out of his system before he settled down. So I thought that a man who had been about for a while might be ready to marry."

Amelia looked pained. "They do not 'get it' out of their system." She thought it over. "None of them do, if it comes to that. I suppose the only virtue a rake can lay claim to is that they are not hypocrites who settle down with a wife and then carry on behind their back."

Kathryn looked at Amelia sharply at that, realizing from the tone of her voice that she was not generalizing. Apparently Amelia also realized that she had given far too much away for she got up abruptly, excused herself and went off to bed.

Kathryn did not go up to bed immediately for she was hoping that Sebastian might return. She had sensed that he had a particular reason for going out again and she had the uneasy feeling that he meant to have words with Lord Stanwyke. Of course, he

generally did stay out quite late and she knew it might have nothing to do with his anger about the exchange between her and Lord Stanwyke, but she also knew that she would rest better if she saw him before she went up and knew that he had exchanged nothing more harsh than words with the younger man.

The possibility that he had simply returned to his mistress occurred to her, as well, but she tried not to think about that for it only made her feel angry and hurt and, if she allowed herself to dwell on it, she was bound to behave very badly when Sebastian did come in.

Those thoughts took her back to the conversation with Amelia and she wondered how deeply Amelia had been wounded by her husband. She was in the habit of mostly thinking of Amelia as her nemesis, for they had not gotten off to a very good start at all. And even though she realized she owed it to Amelia that she had even been allowed to stay in London and go about in society, she also felt restricted in a way she was not accustomed to and disliked excessively.

It had been easy to simply accept the façade Amelia projected and think of her only as a cold, unfeeling harpy who seemed to delight only in making other people miserable. Now, she felt as if she had completely misjudged the woman. Now she began to wonder if the woman behind the cold, hard exterior was fragile and wounded and lonely.

Perhaps, she thought, she was attributing far too much to so little? She did not think that she had been wrong in interpreting what Amelia had said to be a direct link to her dead husband, but the feelings she hid so well might be nothing more than resentment because she had been humiliated by the man's behavior. It did not necessarily follow that she had been hurt by it, or that she was nursing the wounds still.

All the same, it made Kathryn uncomfortable and she resolved that she would be more careful of Amelia's feelings. For whether Amelia had graciously accepted the role as her chaperone or not, she had still taken on a task that was difficult and one, moreover, that she was under no obligation to perform.

Tiring of occupying herself only with her thoughts after a while, and in no mood to try to ply her needle, she left the parlor once the servants had begun to drift toward their beds and went into Sebastian's study to find a book. Most of the books, she discovered, were of no interest to her at all. She could not even imagine them as being of a great deal of interest to Sebastian and decided that it was most likely a generational collection of books. There were histories, and books on science and mathematics, animal husbandry and farming, and collections of writings by explorers. Settling finally on a collection of writings by a man who had traveled fairly extensively throughout the Americas, she considered whether to return to the parlor or settle where she was and finally opted for the study since she thought it less likely that she would miss seeing Sebastian when he came in.

She thought it probable that he would go straight up to his rooms when he finally did return, for it was already very late, but his study was near the stairs so even if he did she was still less likely to miss him if she waited there instead of in the parlor.

As interesting as the book was, it did not help her stay awake. Curled up in one of the large, high backed chairs before his desk, she nodded off, roused, and nodded off again, and began to realize, vaguely, that she might just as well go on up to bed. Instead, she scooted down a little further, made a pillow of her arms and dozed again.

The tread of his boots against the hardwood floor roused her again sometime later. Woozy as she was from being roused from a deep sleep, the sound nevertheless connected in her mind as his tread. The sound was muted as he left bare wood and stepped onto thick carpet. She puzzled over that for several moments, struggling to recall whether the stairs were carpeted or not and finally opened her eyes.

Sebastian, she discovered, had come into the study and was crouched before the chair she was sleeping in.

He was not pleased. "What are you doing here instead of in your bed?"

The question was a little too complex for her current state. "Waiting for you," she answered the first part.

"Why?"

She lifted her head, looking around, vaguely disoriented to find herself in his study until she finally remembered that she had decided to find herself a book to try to stay awake. She began to look for the book, checking her hands first and then her lap and finally the chair. "I had a book."

His dark brows snapped together. "You were waiting for me about a book?" he asked disbelievingly.

"I was?" Kathryn asked, lifting her head to look at him in surprise.

His irritation vanished and amusement took its place. "You are drunk with sleep. Come on," he added grasping her arm and helping her up from the chair. "Up to bed with you."

She made a discovery when she tried to rise. Her legs were asleep from being wedged so tightly into the chair for so long. They wobbled and collapsed beneath her as she stood up. Fortunately, Sebastian still had a grip on her arm. He caught her around the waist as she began to sink again, hoisting her upward until she was slumped against him like a rag doll.

He hesitated. "I will almost certainly live to regret this," he muttered finally. Catching her arms, he looped them around his neck. "Hold on," he instructed her and bent to place an arm beneath her knees and one along her back, lifting her.

"This is nice," she murmured drowsily, nuzzling her face against his jacket and breathing in the combination of scents that wafted from him and his hair and clothing ecstatically. She tightened her arms around his neck as he turned and her head spun dizzily. "Why will you regret it?"

"Because it is nice," he muttered.

Kathryn struggled for a moment to make sense of that and gave it up when it seemed like it would rouse her more than she wanted since she was far more interested in going back to sleep. "Oh."

As he began to ascend the stairs with her, she discovered his hair was tickling her arms where they rested on the back of his neck and decided to explore it surreptitiously. It felt delightful gliding through her fingers, surprisingly soft and silky.

"Stop that," he said irritably.

"It tickled."

He set her on her feet and steadied her when they reached her room. "Will you be alright? Or should I roust Miss Lynette from her bed?"

She was on the point of telling him that she wasn't at all certain that Lynette had returned, but she realized immediately that he would not be happy with that. "I am fine."

More awake now," she said, reluctantly pulling her arms from around his neck. "Are you still angry with me?"

"Is that why you sat up half the night?" he said after a long hesitation.

She wrestled with the answer to that, still a little too groggy to decide whether it would be alright to tell the truth, or if it would be better to just agree. "Partly," she responded finally.

He nudged her chin up with the tips of his fingers, his look questioning when she met his gaze.

It was not a good idea, she decided then, to tell him she had stayed up because she was worried about him. He was not likely to appreciate her being concerned that he might get hurt in dealing with Lord Stanwyke. He would interpret that to mean she thought he was not capable of defending himself, which would injure his male pride. And it was not true. She remembered the way he had punched Dermot out once and there were not many men who could have managed that, for Dermot was a big man and very handy with his fists, a sword, or a pistol. Moreover, Dermot respected Sebastian and she knew he would not have if he had not considered Sebastian his equal.

Instead of answering, she lifted her chin from his fingers and looked away.

"Good night, my lord."

He placed a hand along the doorframe, blocking her when she tried to turn away.

"You were concerned that there might be more than words between me and Stanwyke because of what I witnessed tonight?"

There was a questioning lilt to his voice, but she was wide awake now and it was impossible to ignore the danger in his brooding gaze. "I would not ... want that," she said finally.

His lips tightened. "On my account? Or his?"

She met his gaze with an effort. "I would not care if anything happened to him.

At least--I would not wish it, but I would not feel it deeply."

Some of the tension seemed to ease from him. "I told Stanwyke that I would not take it in good part if he continued his pursuit."

Kathryn looked up at him in dismay and both anger and suspicion flickered in his eyes. She knew what he was thinking, that she had only told him she had no interest in Lord Stanwyke because she did not want to deal with opposition to her wishes.

Impulsively, she slipped her arms around his waist and hugged herself tightly to him.

"Do not be angry with me. I can not help but worry that something ... something bad will happen."

He stiffened when she put her arms around his waist, but he relaxed fractionally at that, placing his arms around her after a moment in a light embrace. She felt the stroke of his hand along her tangled locks, for she had lost most of her pins when she was curled up in his chair and her hair was no longer neatly coifed, but half up and half down. "You have lost too much in your life to have much faith in good things, I suppose," he murmured, resolutely pulling away from her after a few moments. "But I am accounted a fair hand at fisticuffs--and a fair shot if it should come to that."

Was that supposed to comfort her, she thought indignantly? She knew he was being modest about his prowess, that he was accounted far better than merely fair, and she did not find that comforting either. She did not want fists or bullets flying in his



direction at all! “It will not come to that,” she said firmly. “I will be very, very good, Sebas ... my lord! And very, very careful.”

His face lightened with amusement. “You should take care not to make promises you are bound to break, for I am not at all convinced that your idea of good and mine are the same. In fact, I have this terrible fear that they are not!”

Since he dropped his head and kissed her lightly on the forehead, Kathryn did not take his rebuke in bad part. She tipped her head to look up at him when he withdrew, smiling. “I meant your idea of good,” she said teasingly.

His smile vanished, his expression suddenly filled with intent. He lifted one hand slowly, catching her face in the crook between his palm and thumb. Brushing the pad of his thumb lightly along her lower lip, he swallowed audibly. “Hell! I knew this was poor judgment on my part,” he murmured, palming the base of her skull with his other hand and leaning close. “And this is worse still.”

## Chapter Twelve

Stunned, Kathryn froze as she saw his mouth descending toward hers, uncertain of what to do. As intimate as their low voiced conversation had seemed, as closely as they had been standing in the shadowy doorway of her room, she had not anticipated that he might feel compelled to kiss her.

Panic flooded her, not because she did not want him to kiss her, not because she felt any fear or revulsion of the idea, but because she wanted it so much she was afraid that she would do everything she ought not, and nothing she should.

She sucked in a desperate breath as his lips grazed hers, lightly, so lightly she wasn't certain at first if their lips had met or if hers merely tingled from anticipation. He did not leave her long in doubt. Heat blossomed between them as he fitted his lips more firmly against hers, shifting closer until their labored breaths caused their chests to brush with each deep gulp of air they dragged into their lungs, making Kathryn keenly aware of both his body and her own, though most of her focus was on that one point of indescribably wondrous contact between them.

She was afraid to move for fear of breaking whatever spell had drawn him to her, afraid to breathe. She grew dizzy trying to control the rapid breaths her starved lungs demanded and giddier with the desire that had burgeoned at her core and spread outward through her in a wave of tingling heat that seemed to sap the strength from her body.

More by instinct than design, she lifted her hands and placed them on his chest to steady herself, wondering dimly if she should try to push him away. She could not find the strength of will to do so as his kiss became more than a tentative exploration, briefly coaxing as he nipped at her lips with his and then sucked first the upper and then the lower lip.

He was gasping harshly when their lips parted. Pressing his forehead to hers, his lips hovered just beyond her touch as he fought an inner battle. "Dermot should be horsewhipped for giving you into my hands," he muttered hoarsely. He lifted his head slightly to stare down at her and she opened her eyes to look up at him with an effort. "I should be horsewhipped," he murmured raggedly, dipping his head to kiss her again.

There was no tentative exploration as before. He covered her mouth with his own hungrily, seizing on her gasp of surprise as an opening to breach the barrier of her lips with his tongue. A jolt went through her as she felt his tongue rake along hers, as his taste filled her mouth like strong drink, going to her head, setting fire where before she had only felt tantalizing warmth. Her fingers curled into the fabric of his jacket as her senses reeled out of control, but there was no possibility falling, for he pressed her tightly against the door at her back, pressed his body fully against hers until she could feel every taut inch of him along her length, feel the hardness of his engorged member digging into her belly.

She forgot in that instant that she should remain passive if not resistant. To yield was unacceptable. Shaking with need, she lifted her arms to his shoulders to feel his chest pressed more tightly against her aching breasts. Slipping her arms around his neck,

she clung to him weakly as he caressed her mouth with a thrust and retreat of his tongue that was so wildly evocative of his lovemaking that she felt her passage clench and unclench rhythmically as if she could feel his flesh there.

She wanted it, ached desperately to feel him thrusting his manhood into her with the same ferocity as he caressed her mouth.

He made a sound of pleasure deep in his chest as she swallowed and her mouth closed tightly around his tongue. Inspired, she sucked at his tongue tentatively and then harder as she felt a shudder run through him and his kiss became almost savage with need driving her closer to the pentacle she knew marked the culmination.

He broke the kiss after a moment, dragging his mouth from hers and kissing her face, her throat and the tops of her breasts, and finally lifted his mouth upward again, sucking lightly at her neck between her shoulder and ear.

She was shaking all over, could not seem to control the quivering shockwaves that ran through her.

Something about it seemed to pierce the madness that had engulfed him. He dragged in several deep breaths and eased slightly away from her. Released from the imprisonment of his body and the solid surface behind her back, she swayed weakly. He caught her, gathering her into his arms almost gently. "I did not frighten you?" he asked, his voice still harsh.

Kathryn searched her mind, trying to think what he thought he had done to frighten her. "No," she said finally, her own voice muffled against his jacket.

She heard him swallow.

"Did I hurt you?"

The search was shorter this time. She hurt. She ached all over her. Her body still felt as if it was on fire, but she knew he was not asking her that. He was afraid he had been too rough. She did not think he had, but then she had not really been aware of much besides the way his mouth felt on hers and the way his body felt against hers. "No."

He eased away from her and tipped her head up so that he could look at her face.

His expression was taut with his needs. She licked her lips, tasting him there, wanting more.

His expression grew harder. "Go to bed, Kitten, before I do anything more unforgivably rash than I have already done."

She didn't want to, not without him, but she could see that he had himself in hand now. If she pressed him, he might well yield to the temptation, give in to the thundering need she saw in his eyes, but she knew instinctively that it would also destroy something fragile between them.

Nodding jerkily, she went into her room and closed the door, leaning back against it weakly. He remained where he was for many moments after she had shut herself away from him and she held her breath, hoping that he would come to her. Instead, after what seemed a very long time, he turned and strode back down the corridor, back down the stairs and went out the front door.

She bit her lip when she heard the door close behind him, feeling a surge of alarm. Rushing to the window, she peered through the curtains, and finally saw him walking along the sidewalk.

He seemed in no particular hurry and finally, deciding that he had simply decided to take a walk to clear his head--although it was a strange time of the night for a stroll--she moved away from the window and readied herself for bed.

Despite the unrequited desire that still hummed through her, she felt a sense of triumph and euphoria as she settled at last into her bed.

Sebastian had kissed her--a real kiss, not just a kiss of affection or friendship, a kiss filled with passion, the sort of kiss only lovers shared. It made her so warm and excited every time she thought about it and allowed herself to relive the moments when he had held her that she thought she would never get back to sleep.

It was everything she had ever dreamed it would be, she thought as she finally slipped over the edge of consciousness and into blissful oblivion.

It took her a few moments after she awoke to figure out why she was so happy. When she had rolled over and burrowed into her pillows, however, the memories flooded back and filled her instantly with the same longing that had followed her into sleep.

A thrill of excitement followed on the heels of it, rousing her to full wakefulness with a sense of urgency to dress and go downstairs to see him. Disappointment filled her when she arrived in the breakfast parlor to discover only Amelia. Tamping it with an effort, she bid his sister a polite greeting and moved thoughtfully to the sideboard to help herself to the food set out in chafing dishes.

"My, we are hungry today," Amelia commented as she moved to the table at last.

Heat flooded Kathryn's cheeks when she saw the heaping plate. "Mercy! My mind was a thousand miles away!"

Amelia unbent sufficiently to smile. "On which beau, I wonder?"

Kathryn's blush deepened to scarlet since the question coincided with Sebastian's arrival. Mortified, she chuckled uncomfortably, struggling to recover her complexion and think of something to say to redirect the conversation. "I was thinking about the book I found to read last night," she said demurely.

Amelia sent her a questioning look.

"It was about the Americas, written by a man who had traveled extensively throughout the colonies and even into some of the wilder areas."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Amelia and Sebastian exchange a speaking glance. She felt no satisfaction at effectively turning the subject, however, for there was something about the way they did it that made her belly clench uncomfortably with dread, that made her wonder if they had had news of Dermot.

She dismissed the notion. They would have told her if they had had news of him, whether good or bad. They would not keep something like that from her. She was scaring herself for nothing. They were only reacting to what they had been told.

She discovered she could not simply dismiss it, however. "You have ... you have not heard anything?" she asked hesitantly, looking directly at Sebastian for the first time.

He hesitated, but finally shook his head, frowning at the dark liquid in his cup. "No more than what I was told when the solicitor brought you."

She searched his face for any sign that he was trying to hide something from her and finally decided, with a good deal of relief, that he was not and returned her attention to her breakfast. She felt far more subdued than she had before, however, and discovered that she had little appetite at all.

She had not, previously, allowed herself to consider that something actually had happened to Dermot. She had been so certain of his wit and strength and invincibility that she had not suffered a moment's doubt that he would come away unscathed from anything that he might face. It was Dermot, after all, and with the exception, possibly, of Sebastian, no one was more clever, resourceful, stronger, or more capable of defending himself.

Perhaps, though, she felt uneasy now because only the night before she had acknowledged that Sebastian was not infallible? She had allowed fear and doubt to enter her mind because she had realized that there were no guarantees in life beyond the fact that, at some time, it would end.

A suffocating sense of loss enveloped her in spite of all she could do to prevent it, to reason it away, or to simply banish it. She could not love strongly enough to protect those she loved from harm, she realized. It was not a shield.

Excusing herself abruptly, she went in search of Lynette. To her relief, she found her in the small salon where they usually gathered in the mornings after they had broken their fast. Lynette looked up at her in welcome, but frowned when she saw Kathryn's expression. "Goodness! You look as if you have seen a ghost! What is wrong, dearest?"

Dropping to her knees beside Lynette's chair, Kathryn wrapped her arms around Lynette's waist and laid her head in her lap. "You will say I am only letting my imagination run away with me and frightening myself without reason," Kathryn muttered.

Lynette set her needlework to one side and ran a hand soothingly along Kathryn's shoulders. "I can not say any such thing because I have no notion what has distressed you."

Kathryn swallowed with an effort against the hard knot that had formed in her throat. "I have been so thoughtless, so selfish, focusing only on what I wanted."

Still puzzled, Lynette glanced toward the door of the salon when she heard a light tread and saw that Lord Huntington had come to stand in the doorway, his expression one of concern, not anger. She looked a question at him for enlightenment, but he merely shook his head infinitesimally. Sighing, she continued to stroke Kathryn soothingly. "I have known you to be headstrong and willful, and occasionally even thoughtless of the consequences of something to yourself, but never selfish. What is it that you think you have done wrong?"

Kathryn lifted her head, searching Lynette's face for reassurance. "What if he needed me and I was not there for him?"

Understanding dawned after a few moments. "What do you think that you could do if you were there?"

Kathryn frowned. "Something. I would think of something. I can do nothing from here. I should have gone to search for him when he did not return. He would have come to look for me."

Lynette gathered her close, nodding at Lord Huntington over Kathryn's shoulder. "Dearest, you can not think like that. Dermot would not have expected you to go harrying off to the wildness of the colonies to come to his rescue. And I suspect he would not be at all happy that you would even consider it. Whatever tangle he has gotten himself in to, you may be sure that he is clever enough to get himself out of it again."

"I thought so too," Kathryn murmured against Lynette's shoulder. "But what if I was wrong? What if something terrible has happened to him?"

"Hush!" Lynette said briskly. "What have I told you about frightening yourself with your imaginings?"

"That it is silly and childish and unproductive," Kathryn repeated dutifully, a smile creeping into her voice.

"Exactly! It is all very well to have an imagination, but one must be sensible! You can not deal with a thing until you are facing it, for you can not know what you must deal with until you do."

Kathryn squeezed Lynette tightly and pulled away, sitting back on her heels. "Was it wrong of me to come here, you think?"

Lynette flicked a glance at the doorway again, but when she saw that Lord Huntington had disappeared, she smiled at Kathryn. "I think you did just as you ought and that it is a very good thing that, for once, your own desires and Dermot's were not at odds. Otherwise we would still be in the country and you would not be here with two very kind people who have graciously taken you in and are doing their utmost to see you happily settled in your life. You are a woman grown now. You did not expect to stay with Dermot forever?"

Kathryn smiled. "No, of course not! He would be wishing himself well rid of me, for there is no getting around the fact that I have cramped his style."

Lynette snorted. "Gracious! I would hate to see how wild he was if you were not, for I have certainly not noticed that he has made a great deal of sacrifice for his only child!"

A mixture of emotions flickered across Kathryn's features at that. "That is not a kind thing to say about Dermot, and it is not true, and you know it."

Lynette smiled wryly, but she knew better than to pursue that vein and distress Kathryn with conflicting loyalties. "I stand corrected."

Kathryn got up and kissed her cheek. "I do love you dearly, Lynette! You always make me feel better."

Lynette reddened. "I love you, too. I will be forever grateful that Dermot brought me in to take care of you, for I do not believe it would have been half as rewarding to bring up a child of my own as it has been you."

Kathryn chuckled, settling into a chair across from her. "Now you are bawling me! You were always used to say that I would be the death of you and that I was the devil's spawn."

Lynette gave her a look. "I do not recall ever saying any such thing. I might have implied it, but I have never said it, for there is no getting around the fact that it has been a great trial keeping you safe when you have always been so high spirited. I do not believe that there stands a single tree on Lord Marshall's estate that you did not climb and I was convinced that you would break your neck long before you lived to get grown! That is what makes it so rewarding now," she added prosaically. "For now I can look back and wonder how I ever managed it and congratulate myself on a job well done!"

Kathryn gurgled with nostalgic laughter. "Do you recall the time that you decided to climb up after me to teach me a lesson and Dermot and half the servants turned out to help get you down?"

Lynette gave her a look. “How could I forget? I still have heart palpitations when I recall it!”

Rebuked, Kathryn contained her amusement at the memory with an effort, but since Amelia took that moment to sail briskly into the room, there was no opportunity to pursue other fond memories of her childhood in any case. Kathryn glanced at her in puzzlement, for she had not heard her approach, but finally dismissed it with the reflection that she had been engrossed in conversation with Lynette and simply had not registered the sounds of Amelia’s arrival.

“We have more invitations,” she announced, “and we shall stay on the go if we try to make the half of them so we must consider them all very carefully and decide which functions will be best for us to attend.”

## Chapter Thirteen

It did not escape Kathryn's notice that Sebastian was cool and withdrawn toward her after the night that he kissed her. It would not be accurate to say that she was not dismayed by the discovery, for she had hoped that it would be a pivotal point in their relationship, that he could no longer dismiss her as a mere child, that he would have to acknowledge that he perceived her as a woman and one, moreover, that was desirable.

She was vastly disappointed when she discovered that he had withdrawn, but she was not terribly surprised. One of the things she had always admired about Sebastian was his sense of honor and his loyalty to his close friends.

He could not help but feel that he had broken faith with both her and Dermot, and above and beyond that, behaved dishonorably toward a young woman entrusted to his care. She knew, whatever Amelia seemed to think of her brother, that he was not selfish, or cold, or careless and that he was currently engaged in a fierce battle with his conscience.

She chaffed at it, worried that he would shut himself completely away from her in his efforts to cling to what he perceived as the remnants of his honor, but she did her best to comfort herself with the thought that he must accept at some point that they had crossed a barrier and it could not be rebuilt. And she held out hope that when he reached that point he would also feel that the world was well lost without her in his life.

She supposed that that was being a bit too optimistic, but she had at least had proof that he was not completely indifferent to her. He had wanted her. She would not allow herself to dwell on the niggling doubts that tried to creep into her mind that he had simply wanted a woman and she had been handiest at the moment. She did understand that men had drives and needs that were different from those women felt, but he had looked into her eyes and wanted her.

She was sure of it.

Almost.

She had enough to keep her busy, in any case, not to dwell too much on her frustrations. Amelia was determined that they not spend a single evening at home, and thus they dressed in their finery each night and attended a soiree of some sort or another. Kathryn could not help but think Sebastian must find it tedious for he must have attended so many in his time that there could be little that was new or exciting or entertaining about seeing the same people at the same homes and doing much the same things as ever. Nevertheless, suffering or not, he neither complained, nor found excuses not to escort them, nor wore an expression of boredom that would have ruined her own enjoyment.

He was coolly distant and exquisitely polite, which at times tried her temper and tempted her to do something outrageous only to get a rise out of him, but he was ever vigilant on her behalf.

Lord Stanwyke kept his distance, but she could not be completely easy about it, for she could not help but notice that whenever she was in the room, his brooding gaze was upon her more often than not. She sensed that he was awaiting an opportunity to



approach her when she was not under Lord Huntington's watchful eye, but tried her best to dismiss it as fanciful, and most likely nothing more than the product of her anxiety because Sebastian had already felt compelled to warn him off.

After a while, though, she simply forgot it. When a week passed and then two, Kathryn began to be far more concerned about the fact that Sebastian seemed to have gotten over whatever it was that had inspired him to kiss her. He never failed to show up on the evenings when she and Amelia had plans to go out, and never showed his face on Clermont Street at any other time so that Kathryn began to suspect that he was no longer even sleeping in his own bed. Even Amelia, who rarely seemed surprised about anything, or to notice much beyond her own concerns, remarked on his 'odd' behavior.

"I must suppose that Sebastian has found . . .," she paused mid-sentence for a fraction too long for it to go unnoticed, "other interests, but I suppose we should not complain that he is not underfoot. We have plenty to entertain ourselves with now that you and I have friends coming to call, and he has not let us down when we are in need of escort. Actually, I confess I am pleasantly surprised that he has done as well as he has by you, Kathryn. In a general way, he is not at all reliable, for he has been used to having his own way and doing just as he pleases at all times without having to worry about anyone else."

Kathryn and Lynette, who were sharing the small salon with her, shared a speaking glance and tacitly returned their attention to their needlework. "I am sure I have been a great trial to both of you," Kathryn said after a moment.

"Nonsense!" Amelia said bracingly. "I will admit that I had my doubts in the beginning, but I have grown very fond of you, my dear, and I for one have been enjoying myself hugely."

Kathryn lifted her head to smile at her. "I am glad, for I have grown fond of you, as well."

Amelia's cheeks pinkened with pleasure. "I would even go so far as to say that I feel that you have been a good influence on my brother. I had despaired that he would ever give a thought to settling down himself, but I can not help but hope that may change. Not that he has shown any particular interest in anyone that I can tell--and, of course, he would not unless he was prepared to commit himself--but he was prone in the past to eschew the company of acceptable young women altogether. And he has unbent sufficiently to ask a few very promising young women to dance instead of promptly vanishing whenever a hostess would introduce him to a young lady as he was used to do."

Kathryn had noticed it, too, and she was not nearly as happy about it as Amelia was.

He had not asked her to dance! Of course, she could not complain that she had been ignored. There were always plenty of young men willing to sign her dance card, but she did not particularly care whether she danced with them or not.

"I know I should not pry, but you have not mentioned whether you have found anyone of particular interest?" Amelia said questioningly.

Kathryn pasted a false smile on her lips. "I hope you will not be disappointed if I tell you I have not?"

Amelia was disappointed, but she struggled to hide it. "Do not be silly! You can not will these things to happen! It takes time. And you are very young yet. It would

almost be a shame to settle you in your first season, although that would be a feather in our cap if you were snatched up at once, and by someone of wealth and rank--such as Lord Hollyewell who has shown a marked disposition for your company--if you will forgive the vulgarity."

Kathryn frowned. "I suppose. I do not think I particularly care for another season, however, thank you. I do not wish to appear ungrateful, and I have been enjoying myself, but I think I miss the country."

Amelia shrugged. "You will be weary of it, mark my words, before we return to the city. You may be certain that Sebastian will breathe a sigh of relief the moment the season is over and dash off somewhere and we will most likely not see him again until next season. We will remove to Bath, of course, before that and that will be amusing for a bit, but then we will not even have that to entertain us. Of course, there will be the occasional dinner party, picnics from time to time and that sort of thing, but we will not have a great deal to stave off the boredom of country life!"

Kathryn was fairly certain that Amelia could not have thought of anything to depress her more if she had tried. She was prone to be optimistic in a general way, but with the best will in the world, she could not perceive the season in any other way than more than half over. She might not have experienced society before, but she knew their customs and habits well from the things that Dermot had told her.

She had been trying very hard to convince herself that she would not fail to engage Sebastian's interest, but with so little time left to manage it she could not prevent doubts from creeping insidiously into her mind. She had meant it when she had said she did not want another season, for she felt that time was against her. If she could not capture Sebastian's interest now, when she felt sure that she was as pretty as she was ever going to get, how much chance would she have as she grew older year by year? As the blush of youth left her cheeks and she began to fade into spinsterhood?

She did not think she could bear to go through another year of hopefulness just to see her hopes dashed, or worse, to watch as Sebastian courted someone else and finally took the plunge without her.

She rather thought that she would prefer to be far, far away if he found someone and fell in love, for then she could at least pretend that he was still there, still as she remembered him.

She had concluded, in fact, that if she found that Sebastian did not want her then she would go off to find Dermot and go adventuring with him. She could not bring herself to settle for less than she wanted. She did not particularly want to be married. She only wanted Sebastian.

No doubt Amelia would be scandalized at that if she were to tell her, so she decided that it was probably best not to do so. After more thought and a great deal of soul searching, she finally concluded that that would be for the best for everyone. It was very sweet of Amelia to express a willingness to chaperone her about for yet another season, but it would not be right to take advantage of her good nature and allow the woman to go to so much trouble when she had no intention of choosing a husband at all.

It still grieved her to take pen to paper and write to Dermot's solicitor, but she took herself to task and did what she knew needed to be done. Arrangements would have to be made. She could not simply show up on the man's doorstep and expect him to perform miracles. And she knew Sebastian well enough to know that he would not

simply accept her decision. He had taken guardianship of her, and he took that responsibility very seriously indeed. He would most likely try to stop her even if he wished her in perdition and off his hands.

Instructing Mr. Winston that she was considering moving to the colonies to search for her father, she informed him that she would need him to see to it that funds were transferred for her needs. He was also to make inquiries regarding passage. She would send a follow up letter sometime in the next few weeks regarding the disposition of Elk Park and the servants there once she had had time to consider what would be best.

When she had reread the letter several times to make certain that her instructions were clear and that she had thought of everything, she sealed it and sent it off with a servant to be posted. Quelling the temptation to yield to self pity and simply throw herself on her bed and weep, she turned her mind instead to trying to figure out if there was any prospect left that she would not have to abandon her one hope for true happiness.

She could not convince herself that there was, try though she might. For what chance did she have to break down Sebastian's defenses when he was too wary now to give her the opportunity?

There seemed little point, now, in wishing that she had done things differently, that instead of yielding she had pushed him away, but she thought that even that would not have changed anything--certainly not for the better. Very likely if she had rejected his advances he would have been more withdrawn, not less so.

Finally, she decided that there was nothing that she could do that she was not already doing. She would simply have to bide her time and hope that Sebastian would give her an opening to try to reach him and in the meanwhile, she could focus on tormenting him if at all possible by pretending she was having the time of her life and flirting madly with the men who were willing to pay her some attention.

She would have felt far better if she had known that it was having some effect.

Sebastian, when he could think rationally at all, strongly suspected that Kathryn was going out of her way to torment him. Despite his half formed fear/hope that she would confront him about his behavior on that never to be sufficiently regretted night, she not only did not, she behaved as if nothing had ever happened at all which he found both disturbing and illogically infuriating. Not once did he encounter a single reproachful glance, either for kissing her to start with, or for not pursuing it any further.

Truth to tell, he was not entirely clear on what had happened, not all of it at any rate. That had nothing to do with the fact that he had stopped by his club for a few drinks before hand, for he had not overindulged--not even close. He had still been so furious with Stanwyke when he arrived at his club that the two drinks he had allowed himself had barely cooled his temper.

Regardless, his wits had gone a begging the moment he discovered Kathryn asleep in his study. He should have just woken her up and sent her straight up to bed, and he knew it, but she had looked so enticing curled up in his chair with her hair falling down around her shoulders that he had not been able to resist the temptation to study her.

He supposed, wryly, that he had been searching for flaws, hoping that he would find something that would dispel his perception of flawlessness because he had not actually been able to simply study her to his heart's content before. Partly because he could not look at her for more than five seconds before his mind began to conjure all

sorts of imagery that he had no business thinking about and partly because he could not afford to allow anyone else to realize how obsessed he was with her.

He had told himself that she was too groggy with sleep to safely negotiate the stairs, and he thought that might have been true, but the wisest solution would have been to summon a servant to help her, or Lynette, or even Amelia.

The least intelligent thing had been the solution he had chosen, because she had stirred his senses the moment she had curled up around him. He had already been well on his way to throwing caution out the door and good sense behind it when they had arrived at her room. If he had just allowed her to go on in, everything still would have been alright, but she had brought up Stanwyke and that had immediately brought anger and jealousy in to play to add to his turmoil, pushing reason and common sense beyond recovery.

He thought, however, that the critical moment when he had completely lost control was when she had looked up at him. He did not know what there was about that look that affected him so forcefully, but every time she gave him that look he completely forgot--well, pretty damned well everything.

Nothing after that point was really clear in his mind until he'd found himself freezing his ass off, pacing up and down the road outside the house like a madman. The cold had cleared his head, cooled his ardor, but the unfortunate fact of the matter was that he had not actually had his mind with him when he was kissing Kathryn so even the cold had not helped him recall anything with any clarity--beyond the ardor he was trying to regain control of.

The thing that had finally penetrated the madness that had gripped him and stopped him from taking it any further, which he had been damned close to doing, was the realization that she was shaking like a leaf. Hell, he had been shaking like he had the ague, himself! He had thought it was desire. He knew that was what it was with him, but now he was not nearly as certain as he wanted to be--needed to be about Kathryn's reaction to him. Whatever she had said to the contrary, whatever her life had actually been like, she was still painfully young, though, and inexperienced, and he could not quite convince himself that he had not scared her silly.

He had thought that he would know, one way or the other, when he saw her the next morning. She had blushed when he had come into the room, and he had waited for her to look at him--braced for the worse. If she smiled, shyly or otherwise, he had not frightened or disgusted her. If she gave him a cold shoulder and refused to look at him, she was angry and/or hurt that he'd taken advantage. If she flicked a frightened or reproachful glance in his direction she was thinking he was a complete animal.

Instead of doing any of those things, however, like any other woman of his acquaintance would have and letting him know where the hell he stood, she had leapt up and gone to Lynette for comforting and he had not known how to take that at all.

He was afraid, though, that her sudden need for motherly comfort and grief for her missing father was Kathryn's way of saying 'he scared the living hell out of me and now I want to go home'.

As many women as he had been intimately acquainted with, as well as he had believed he understood females, Kathryn made him feel like a green kid without a clue. He did not know why he kept expecting her to behave in any way that he understood or

could deal with. She had not once, in the entire time he had known her ever done anything the least bit predictable.

He had not known one moment's peace since he had first beheld that angelic face of hers and he had begun to think he never would again.

It was just as well, he told himself, that she had kicked him in the gut and brought him back to Earth because he had been in a fair way to making one hell of a mess. He still thought Dermot ought to be horsewhipped for handing the girl over to him. Dermot knew him. He had to know him well enough to know that he was no saint and no man short of a saint would be able to keep his hands off of a woman like Kathryn.

In fact, he thought indignantly, knowing Dermot, the bastard had probably thought it was a hell of a prank to play on his old friend--saddling him with a chit fresh out of the school room that he was duty bound to protect, knowing he was going to be suffering the torment of the damned wrestling with his conscience, his honor, his duty to his friend--and his lust.

He had actually toyed with the idea that, maybe, Dermot had made the arrangement because he wanted Sebastian to have her, that he'd figured the friendship between them and Sebastian's lust would force him to do the only honorable thing he could do and that was to marry her.

As tempting as that thought was, though, it was almost as enraging to think Dermot might have been trying to manipulate him into marriage. Which was a hell of a thing to do to a friend! He had not seen Dermot shackling himself to a woman!

He was not at all certain he wanted to settle down at all, let alone being rushed into it out of the blue. He particularly disliked the notion of being rushed.

He had finally concluded that until he did make up his mind about it, he needed some distance from Kathryn. He needed distance anyway until he figured out whether she hated him now or not.

He sure as hell could not tell from her behavior, not as long as she was determined to act as if nothing at all had happened.

He quickly discovered, though, that once he had retreated to a safe distance to observe, he was by no means alone in his obsession with Kathryn. By the time he had come up for air and looked around, he discovered that he could not take her anywhere at all and expect to get within a mile of her for the men falling over themselves to catch her attention. And he did not know what enraged him more, the way they looked at her--for he knew exactly what was going through their minds--or the way she smiled upon them and behaved as if he had ceased to exist.

He had begun to look forward to the end of the season and the chance to shake some of Kathryn's suitors loose as a drowning man searching frantically for purchase, however. Because it was beginning to look like it was going to be touch and go as to whether he was going to be able to continue ducking the men determined to approach him to ask permission to pay their addresses. And he sure as hell was not going to give anyone permission to pay their addresses until he decided whether the idea of marriage was something he could accustom himself to or not.

## Chapter Fourteen

"This," Amelia announced triumphantly with barely contained excitement, "will be our crowning glory of the season! I am beyond ecstatic that we received an invitation, for invitations to the Duchess' ball are always much sought after! Of course they are always a sad crush, but that is the hallmark of success."

Kathryn did her best to look enthusiastic and excited, but it took a supreme effort. Plans were already underway to remove to Bath in little more than a week. Amelia had tried her best to put a positive face on things, but Kathryn knew she was tremendously disappointed that Kathryn had not gotten any offers.

Not that Kathryn cared. Truth be told, she was immensely relieved. The balancing act that she had been maintaining for weeks had been a tremendous strain. She had to appear to be having a good time to keep Amelia from suspecting that anything was wrong, and also because she did not want Amelia to feel that her efforts had all been for nothing. She had to flirt, otherwise how was she to make Sebastian livid with jealousy?

And yet, she could not favor any one man above another, else she ran the risk that he would offer for her and possibly develop an affection for her that she could not return.

She did not want to hurt anyone in the pursuit of her own happiness.

The upshot of that, besides the strain to her nerves, was that there was hardly a woman her age that did not despise the sight of her. She had managed to form a few friendships along the way, but even those had cooled toward her.

It was unfair, of course. She had not only not set out to attach any of the young men who had already begun to show favor to one girl or another, she had not flirted with any of them, and she did not truly want any of them.

Not that she particularly cared even if the other girls did not like her. It was not as if she would see them again, and she knew very well that none of them had actually liked her to begin with. They had only been civil out of politeness, or because they thought that she was popular and being around her would attract attention to themselves.

Now, however, they whispered about her behind her back and tittered whenever she walked by.

Because they were thrilled silly that no one had offered for her after all.

"You are pensive."

Kathryn glanced up in surprise when Sebastian spoke to her, wondering if he was trying to draw her into conversation or merely making an observation.

"I am sure she is nervous, for we have not yet been to anything quite this grand," Amelia said, reaching over to pat Kathryn's hand.

Kathryn turned to look at her, realizing that she was going to miss Amelia. She smiled at her chaperone affectionately. "You are nervous," she said teasingly.

"You look tired," Sebastian observed.

"What a thing to say!" Amelia snapped irritably. "You will crush her self confidence and we have not even arrived."

Kathryn chuckled at the quick defense. "I am not offended and I am not crushed," she disputed. And she was not particularly tired. She was sad.

Giving herself a mental shake she smiled at Sebastian. "It is only that I am a little sad to think the season is almost over and we shall find ourselves with no where to go soon. And we have become so used to gallivanting that it will be hard to grow accustomed to that," she lied. "I think I have gotten terribly spoiled."

"Oh! It will not be as dull as that at Bath," Amelia assured her. "You'll see."

"What is it like?" Kathryn asked, figuring that would be enough to fill the conversation until they reached their destination.

To her relief, it was. Amelia was still talking about previous visits to the seashore that she had enjoyed when their carriage pulled into the long line of carriages waiting to disgorge their passengers at the residence of the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough.

Despite her depression, it was hard not to feel a thrill of pleasure at seeing so many grandly dressed lords and ladies. The pageantry alone was impressive, and the elaborate decorations of the house and gardens, the music, which could be heard in the street, and the glittering sparkle of hundreds of candles winking through enormous glass chandeliers.

They were caught in a crush before they had even gained the entrance. Inside, despite cavernous rooms, the crowding was worse and many of the guests had yet to enter the manse. Kathryn was hardly in the door before she was greeted by one of the 'friends' she had been thinking of on the way over. Sarah was bursting with excitement tonight, however, and far warmer than she had been in a while.

She displayed the reason on her finger. Kathryn was suitably awed and smiled at Sarah with genuine pleasure. "I am so happy for you, Sarah! When?" she asked, catching the other girl's excitement.

Sarah giggled. "When did it become official? Or when are we to wed?"

"Both!" Kathryn demanded at once.

Sebastian had disappeared by the time she thought to look for him again. After glancing around and discovering that the room was far too crowded to pick him out among the other guests, she followed Amelia as they slowly made their way through, stopping from time to time to speak to acquaintances. Happily, Kathryn's dance card filled fairly quickly and she soon found herself on the dance floor.

She loved to dance. If nothing else could be said for the various parties they had attended, she could always count on enjoying that particular aspect. She danced until her feet hurt and her throat was parched. She was fanning herself to cool her face when Sir Langly came to claim his dance. He smiled faintly. "Would you care to go for refreshment instead?"

She glanced around a little doubtfully at the crowd. "I am not at all certain where the refreshments are."

He offered his arm. "I would gallantly offer to go and search for you, but I fear I might not find my way back. Or worse, I would struggle back only to discover that someone had snatched you away while I was gone."

"As if I would allow anyone to tear me away when I was waiting for punch," Kathryn said teasingly.

"Ouch!" he murmured, though he did not look particularly wounded.

The refreshment table, they discovered, had been setup in the room adjoining the ballroom. It was nearly as noisy and crowded as the ballroom, but the terrace doors had been left slightly ajar to let in a breath of frosty air. Kathryn shivered as the chill air brushed along her overheated skin.

"Cold?" Sir Langly asked as he returned with a cup of punch.

"A little, but I hate to give it up for it so very warm in the ballroom."

Frowning, he studied the area and finally guided her to a quieter spot near the tall doors that led out onto the terrace. "Better?"

She was mildly surprised to discover it was, for the currents of chilly air were flowing across the room, sucked in no doubt by the excessive heat, and the spot he had chosen was only lightly affected by the draft flowing past. "Much!"

"I was not at all certain that you would accept a dance," he said after a few moments, "let alone agree to walk with me."

Kathryn glanced at him in surprise. "Why would you think that?"

He shrugged. "Lord Huntington gave me to understand that you would not welcome any particular interest on my part. But I will be leaving at the end of the week and I did not want to go without at least telling you goodbye."

Kathryn was so stunned that she could think of nothing at all to say for several moments. She felt her color fluctuating madly. "I am so glad you came to say goodbye. I do think of you as a friend and I would have been distressed if you had not," she managed to say, although she hardly knew what she was saying.

He frowned. "You did not know?"

Kathryn merely stared at him blankly, unable to formulate any sort of reply to that. He nodded after a moment, his expression grim. "It is his prerogative, after all, as your guardian to decide whom he considers suitable," he muttered. "But I am not wholly dependant upon .... Never mind," he finished, his face clearing. "I will not be leaving England straight away, and perhaps we will get another opportunity to talk."

"Here you are, Miss Kathryn!" a male voice said nearby, penetrating Kathryn's haze of utter confusion and the rabble of voices around them. "Lady Amelia sent me to find you."

"Stanwyke," Sir Langly acknowledged him with a curt nod. "I will leave you with your escort then. Good evening."

Kathryn had just glanced at Lord Stanwyke, vaguely surprised, when Sir Langly excused himself and departed. "Amelia sent you?" she asked doubtfully, watching Sir Langly's departure with a vague sense of discomfort.

Lord Stanwyke nodded, tucking her hand in the crook of his arm. "She wanted you to go down to the first dinner with her."

Kathryn frowned, but allowed him to lead her away, wondering why Amelia would have sent Lord Stanwyke to escort her. Surely she knew that Sebastian did not approve of him at all?

But he had not approved of Sir Langly either, and she was still trying to digest that and figure out what it meant. Nothing, quite possibly, she supposed beyond what Sir Langly himself had deduced. She vaguely remembered that Sebastian had remarked that he was a younger son and could not be well set up.

Was that all that it was, though?



She did her best to tamp the surge of hope that leapt inside of her that she had mistaken Sebastian's reasons for being so cool and distant, but it refused to be banished. Was it the opening she had been looking for? Hoping that she would get?

Or was she merely allowing her imagination to run away with her again? As Sir Langly had pointed out, a part of his duty as her guardian was to see to it that he weeded out the unsuitable petitions for her hand.

Kathryn emerged abruptly from her abstraction when she discovered that Lord Stanwyke was leading her downstairs. "Why are we going downstairs?"

He sent her a faintly amused glance. "Dinner? You are distracted."

She frowned, feeling a stirring of uneasiness she could not entirely place. "She is meeting me downstairs?"

"In the dining hall," he confirmed.

Trying to shake off both the uneasiness and the shocked confusion that had distracted her before Lord Stanwyke had arrived to escort her, Kathryn looked around as they reached the next floor and he turned purposefully along a corridor. There did not seem to be many people on this floor. "Where is everyone?"

"Very likely they have already gone in. We should hurry."

Kathryn resisted when his grip tightened on her arm and he lengthened his stride. "This does not seem entirely right," she said a little breathlessly, alarm rapidly overtaking the vague uneasiness of before and throwing her into more confusion. "The dining hall is on this floor?"

He pulled her to a stop and grasped a door latch. "Ah, here we are, I believe."

Kathryn stared blankly at the room he had revealed. It was dimly lit, but it looked more like a small salon than a dining hall. "This does not look right," she disputed, resisting as he tugged at her arm.

Ignoring her attempt to resist, he dragged her into the room behind him and closed the door. Disbelief settled over Kathryn as she looked around the room and discovered they were completely alone. It froze her instincts, immobilized her thoughts for several critical moments. Even as it clicked into her mind that she was in danger and she snatched her arm free and whirled to leave, he caught her, carrying her backwards and slamming her back against the wall behind her hard enough dizzying, disorienting pain shot through head.

His mouth grazed the top of one of her breasts. She slapped at him clumsily. "What do you think you are doing?" she demanded in an angry hiss, abruptly acutely conscious of the fact that she could not be caught in a compromising situation with Lord Stanwyke--not any man, but most certainly not him.

He caught at her arm but she managed to snatch it away before he could grab it and began shoving at his shoulders. She could not budge him, for not only was he far bigger and stronger than she was, he had the added advantage of leverage, using the weight of his body to pin her to the wall.

She had no advantage at all. He was too close for her to put any strength behind a slap or a punch. She tried anyway in mute, grim determination as he shoved a hand into her bodice and scooped one breast free of restraint, cuffing him on the side of his head. He uttered a grunt of pain when she caught him on the ear, releasing her abruptly. She slammed her body against his as he moved back fractionally, trying to use the little leverage she had been given to thrust him far enough away from her to escape. He

grabbed her wrists. She twisted away, managing to slip from between him and the wall, but discovered she could not break the grip he had on her wrists. "Let go of me you bastard!" she ground out, jerking and twisting in an effort to free herself.

Her heart skipped several beats when their gyrations threw both of them off balance. For a moment, she thought they would fall and she knew if he got her on the floor and used his weight against her she did not have a chance. "Just as soon as you give me what you have teasing every bleeding sod in London with!" he snarled.

Fear and fury surged through her. "I will kill you if you touch me, you swine! Let go of me now!"

"When I am finished," he growled, dragging her arms behind her back.

"You are finished now," said a cold, deadly voice near the door.

Both Kathryn and Lord Stanwyke froze, gaping at the man that stepped through the door and closed it behind him. Stanwyke released her abruptly and, off balance, Kathryn fell to her knees. She jumped to her feet immediately, however, and launched herself toward Lord Huntington. "Sebastian!"

He caught her, shoving her behind him. "Pull yourself together," he growled.

Stunned and shaken, Kathryn merely gaped at his back for several moments before his command penetrated her scattered wits. She looked down at her self. Horrified to discover one of her breasts had spilled from her bodice, though she had no clear idea of when or how it had happened, she quickly adjusted it and examined her dress for tears before it occurred to her that her hair had come down from its pins.

"Name your second," Sebastian continued coldly.

Lord Stanwyke stiffened. "You are certain you want to do this?"

Sebastian said nothing for a moment, but Kathryn realized that it was because he was wrestling with his temper. "I will happily kill you now if that suits you better."

Lord Stanwyke blanched. "Hawthorne," he spat. "On Blanchard."

Sebastian nodded. "I will send my man around in the morning." Turning, he caught Kathryn's arm, pulled her away from the door and opened it.

Nodding jerkily, Lord Stanwyke departed. Amelia darted through the doorway behind him, her face as white as Stanwyke's was. Kathryn was so glad to see her it was all she could do to keep from bursting into tears. Pulling away from Sebastian, she rushed to Amelia and threw her arms around her.

"None of that, now!" Amelia said bracingly. "We will be undone if you are in tears when we leave."

Kathryn swallowed back the tears that threatened with an effort. Nodding, she released Amelia and stepped back. Amelia stared at her in horror. "You are bruised all over. What did he ...." She broke off and looked at Sebastian. "You should get our cloaks."

Nodding grimly, Sebastian left.

After glancing around distractedly, Amelia caught Kathryn's hand and led her to a chair. "We need to try to make some order of this mess," she murmured, looking around distractedly.

Numb in the aftermath, Kathryn sat where Amelia left her. Cold seemed to seep into her and her body commenced to quaking inside, the tremors growing harder and harder until her teeth began to chatter. Amelia, she discovered, was shaking as well as she struggled to pin Kathryn's hair in some semblance of order, having collected the pins

she could find on the floor. Sebastian returned with their cloaks before she had finished. After studying Amelia's handiwork for several moments, he moved behind Kathryn, adjusting the coiffure himself. Surveying his own handiwork critically, he finally pulled her to her feet, caught her chin in his hand and tilted her face up to study it from the front. He frowned when he saw how colorless her face was.

"She looks like she's been bled. Pinch her cheeks to get some color into her," he muttered, picking up her cloak, which he had dropped when he had moved to her to help straighten her hair. He placed it around her shoulders, holding her briefly against him. "We need to get her home," he said after a moment. "Are you up to this?"

Amelia nodded jerkily, pinching some color into her own cheeks before she grabbed up her own cloak.

He ushered them out of the room. "I sent round for the carriage when I collected the cloaks," he said grimly, tucking Kathryn's cold hand firmly in the crook of his arm. "Hopefully they will have pulled it to the curb by now."

Feeling strangely as if she was sleep walking, Kathryn clung tightly to Sebastian's arm, focused on trying to keep her teeth from chattering. They passed people, smiling and nodding. Kathryn only vaguely registered the faces. The voices were less recognizable even than that, slurred, distorted, as if she was listening to them from under the water.

Sebastian put his hands on her shoulders as they left the manse, leaning down to whisper in her ear. "Do not faint on me now, Kitten. Just a little further."

She nodded jerkily, not because she had any real clue of what he was talking about, but because she sensed that he expected something out of her. "I am so cold," she said plaintively when they had climbed into the carriage after what seemed forever. She felt strangely heavy, as well, so tired and weak she could not hold her head up.

Amelia grabbed her hands, chaffing them. "Sit up, Kathryn."

She fell back against the seat as the carriage jerked into motion, felt herself slipping sideways, strangely without any fear at all of falling.

"Shock," Sebastian muttered. There was a rustle. Her head spun crazily as she felt his hands grasping her, pulling her across the seat and then she felt the welcome heat of his body as he opened her cloak and his and pulled her snugly against him, wrapping both his cloak and her own tightly around her. She snuggled closer still, nuzzling her face against his cravat. "I am so sorry."

"Shhh. It will be all right. No one noticed."

It was not going to be all right, Kathryn thought, bits and pieces of what had happened slowly flittering into her mind as warmth flowed back into her. Sebastian had challenged Lord Stanwyke to a duel. He meant to kill him. "I am all right," she managed after a moment, although her voice sounded strange even to her own ears.

His arms tightened around her briefly and then he stroked his hand down her back. She could not feel any more than the pressure, but it reassured her. The shivering had subsided to an occasional shudder by the time they reached the house on Clermont Street.

Amelia jumped out with the assistance of the footman, who had opened the door and let down the step. Sebastian settled her on the seat and got out. Once he had helped her down the steps, he swung her up into his arms again. "I can walk," Kathryn protested.

He ignored that, carrying her into the house and striding down the hall toward the stairs and then up them. Kathryn looped her arms around his neck, but she was beginning to feel more alert and as she did fear seeped into her. "I am so sorry, Sebastian. I am all right. Please! Do not do this!" she began to mutter, over and over like a litany.

"Hush, Kitten," he murmured near her ear. "You will be all right in a bit."

She burst into tears when she felt him lowering her, tightening her arms around his neck, clinging to him desperately. He peeled her arms loose gently but firmly and stepped away. Lynette and Amelia surged forward and she realized that they had followed Lord Huntington up to her room, that she had been vaguely aware of them and their low voiced conversation. She ignored them both, lifting her arms to Sebastian in supplication as he backed away from her. "Do not go! Please, Sebastian! Do not leave me!"

His face twisted. He stopped.

"It is all right," Amelia said, grabbing Sebastian's arm, leading him to the door and pushing him outside.

"No!" Kathryn wailed, too frightened to think of anything but holding on to him to keep him safe, struggling against Lynette's hold to jump to her feet and rush after him. "Do not send him away!"

"Hush now!" Lynette said firmly, gathering Kathryn into her arms.

"I am not hurt!" Kathryn sobbed. "He will die! He will kill Lord Stanwyke! Do not let him do this! Please, Amelia! I am not hurt! I swear it! He did not do anything!"

Amelia joined Lynette, trying to soothe her and quiet her and finally Kathryn yielded since she could not fight them both, sobbing against Lynette's breast until she could not catch her breath anymore. Lynette pressed a handkerchief into her hands when her sobs had petered out to an occasional hiccup.

When she had mopped at her eyes and blown her nose, Amelia shoved a spoon into her mouth, forcing her to drink some vile tasting liquid that made her gag. She coughed, clapping a hand to her mouth when her stomach rebelled. By the time she had gotten her rebellious stomach under control, Lynette and Amelia had hauled her to her feet and were stripping her of her clothing.

She stood docilely as they tugged at her and turned her, struggling against a strange floating sensation that was slowly working its way through her. Lynette gasped. "Merciful god! Kathryn! What did he do to you?"

Kathryn looked down uncomprehendingly at the red marks on her arms and breasts and waist that were already darkening to bruises. Images of her struggle with Lord Stanwyke flickered through her mind. "I did this ... I think."

Amelia shoved a gown over her head, grabbing her arms and thrusting them into the sleeves as if she was a child. "You did not do this to yourself," she said angrily. "That ... that ...."

"Swine," Kathryn supplied helpfully.

"That is an insult to pigs!" Amelia snapped, struggling to push the buttons into the button holes with fingers that shook. "Rake, my eye! Rapist! This was no seduction!"

"I did not want him to touch me," Kathryn said vaguely as they led her to her bed and helped her climb in.

"What happened?" Amelia demanded when she had tucked Kathryn in.

Kathryn shook her head, trying to collect her thoughts. "He said you had sent him to escort me to you. That you wanted us to go down to dinner together."

"I would never send someone else to get you, let alone that ... that man! I would have come myself!"

"I thought it was odd," Kathryn admitted. "But I was upset about ... about something. I was not really paying attention until I noticed that no one was about. And then I was afraid to make a scene."

Amelia patted her. "Go to sleep, dearest. We will take care of everything."

Kathryn grabbed her hand. "Sebastian called him out. Do not let him go!"

"Shhh. Do not worry yourself, dearest. We will take care of everything."

Sebastian had just poured himself a drink when Amelia charged into his study, fire in her eyes. "She is bruised and battered from head to toe!" she announced furiously. "You must go at once and find that ... that swine ... and beat him to a pulp!"

Sebastian tensed all over, feeling his own rage well up again and threaten to slip beyond his control. Downing the bourbon in his glass in one gulp, he slammed the tumbler down so hard it cracked. "Gladly," he growled, "but I have already challenged him. It would not be acceptable to beat him within an inch of his life and then put a bullet into him."

"I will find him and beat him to a pulp, then!" Amelia said angrily, marching up and down the carpet in front of Sebastian's desk agitatedly.

Some of Sebastian's rage dissipated as he watched her. "Neither of us can do anything without undoing our efforts tonight on her behalf."

Amelia stopped abruptly at that. "Do you think we pulled it off?"

He shrugged. "I was in no condition at the time to notice any strange looks," he said tightly. "What do you think?"

Amelia frowned, rolling her eyes upward as if she could see the memories collected in her mind. Finally, she looked around a little vaguely until she found a chair and flopped into it. "I can not remember. For the life of me, I can not even recall who we saw on the way out or what we said."

Sebastian's lips flattened. "We will know in a few days," he said dryly. Frowning, he moved back to the decanter and poured himself another drink. "Is she all right?" he asked without turning.

"She is too worried about you to think of herself," Amelia muttered, a wobble in her voice.

Sebastian threw a glance at her over his shoulder. "She should be more worried about Stanwyke," he growled.

Amelia gaped at him. "My god, Sebastian! You do not think ...! You can not think ...! He duped her!"

"How was he able to do that when I specifically told her to stay away from him?" he demanded angrily.

"I do not know!" Amelia snapped. "But she did not get bruised as she is from yielding to him, I can tell you that! She tried to fight him off! She was afraid to call out for fear of the consequences!"

He turned to look at her, his eyes narrowed with fury. "And what of the other consequences if she did not? What if I had not caught sight of the two of them just by

chance? If I had not been searching for her and known that bastard would drag her into the first empty room he discovered, what then?"

Amelia gaped at him in stunned surprise for a moment before her anger resurfaced. "Your rage has turned your mind!"

"She did it to make me insane with jealousy!" he snarled, more furious that he was not at all certain she had than because he suspected she might have. "The question is, how far was she willing to go?"

Amelia blinked as the words pelted her like stones. "Why would she even think she could make you jealous?" she asked coldly.

"I have not touched her, if that is what you are implying," he growled.

"Thank god for small favors!" she snapped.

Uttering a sound of frustration, Sebastian finished his drink and set the tumbler down. He was not fit to talk to anyone at the moment. He was too angry to use caution, not that he gave a damn if Amelia knew how he felt about Kathryn. "I must go out."

"Where?"

His face hardened. "To find Stanwyke and pick a fight with him in public. Neither of us want everyone speculating about why we dueled."

Amelia surged to her feet as he strode toward the door. "If you kill him you will have to flee the country."

He stopped abruptly and pivoted to look at her. "A moment ago you were ready to kill him yourself."

"Kathryn will have no one to protect her if you have to flee the country," she said as he opened the door.

Again, he hesitated. "Then let us hope he does not succeed in putting a bullet through me."

## Chapter Fifteen

Dread filtered into Kathryn's subconscious mind before she even roused sufficiently to become aware of her surroundings. Light spilled into her window. She stared at it blankly for many moments, struggling to figure out what time of day it was and why she felt so strange.

When she had managed to pry her eyes a little wider, she rolled over and discovered Lynette asleep in a chair beside the bed. Apparently awakened by the sounds of movement, Lynette opened her eyes.

"How are you feeling?"

Kathryn frowned at her, trying to figure out why Lynette was sleeping in a chair beside her bed. "Am I sick?"

"Only a little confused, I think," Lynette responded, getting up a little stiffly. "You do not remember what happened last night?"

Her mind, she discovered, was cloudy. "Did you give me something?"

Lynette shrugged. "Amelia thought it best to give you a dose of laudanum to help you sleep."

No doubt that explained the ungodly taste in her mouth and the feeling as if her head had been stuffed with cotton. As she struggled to remember the incident, though, other memories began to pour into her mind, slowly at first, incomprehensible bits and pieces, but then in bigger portions. Her gaze flew to Lynette's face. "Is Lord Huntington all right?"

Lynette's gaze slid away from hers and stark fear erupted inside of Kathryn. "I am certain he is, dearest."

Kathryn sat up abruptly, throwing the covers off. Her body screamed at the simple act and she gasped, freezing mid motion. Lynette caught her shoulders, trying to make her lie down again. "I have to talk to him!" Kathryn exclaimed.

"He is not here, dearest. And even if he was, you can not dash about the house in your night gown!"

"But ... I have to explain!" She grabbed Lynette's hand. "He threatened to kill Lord Stanwyke last night. We have to stop this!"

Lynette's face hardened. "It can not be stopped, Kathryn. You are not a child! Do not behave like one! This is a matter of honor--yours--and he will do what he must."

Kathryn gaped at her in disbelief. "He did not dishonor me! Call a doctor. Let him check me!"

Lynette settled on the bed beside her. "It does not matter than he did not succeed. He tried."

"I do not care!" Kathryn snapped. "I deserved it for being stupid and careless when Sebastian had warned me the man was not to be trusted! Please, Lynette! Let me talk to him, make him see reason. I will die if he is hurt because of me!"

"Do not talk nonsense!" Lynette said angrily. "Lord Huntington can take care of himself."

Kathryn's chin wobbled. "He can not dodge bullets!"

"If you can not control your emotions, Kathryn, I will have to give you another dose of laudanum to calm you down," Lynette said chidingly.

Kathryn struggled with her wayward emotions, more than half tempted to demand the laudanum so that she could escape into oblivion. "It is all my fault," she whispered, pulling away from Lynette and curling up on her bed in a tight ball. "I only wanted him to love me. I could not bear it if anything happens to him because of me."

Lynette stroked her arm soothingly. "It is not your fault. As much as you would no doubt like to think that you control the world around you, you do not. I can not quibble that you showed poor judgment when you allowed Lord Stanwyke to dupe you into going off with him, but he made the decision to do so."

"Because I had been flirting madly with everyone to make Sebastian notice me. He said that I had teased him enough and he meant to have what I had offered."

Lynette's lips tightened. "Do you think every young woman in London has not teased and flirted and done her utmost to capture the attention of whatever man has struck her fancy? You could not know that he would behave so dishonorably. It is not your fault that he saw your innocent flirtation as an invitation to do as he pleased with you!"

Kathryn's chin wobbled. "It is because of who I am, though."

"And that is not your fault either!" Lynette said bracingly. "What I do not understand is how he convinced you to go with him."

Kathryn frowned, struggling to recall exactly what had happened. "Sir Langly had taken me for refreshment and he told me that Sebas--Lord Huntington had refused his suit. I was so--stunned. For I had no idea he had even offered, and then I was thinking that, perhaps, Sebas--Lord Huntington had not accepted because he was thinking about proposing to me. I was not really paying attention when Lord Stanwyke told me Amelia had sent for me, for my mind was on that. I remember that I thought it was strange and I was a little uneasy in my mind, but ... there were so many people! It did not occur to me once that he was taking me somewhere to get me alone, not until I suddenly discovered that we were alone. And then it was too late. I could not free myself from him and I was afraid that if I called out ... I knew Sebastian would be furious. I just did not want him to find out."

Lynette patted her shoulder. "You are fortunate you were not hurt worse," she said after a moment. "You must cease to torment yourself for this. I can not say that it was not poor judgment, but you could not be expected to anticipate something so dastardly in the midst of half of the ton."

"Do you feel up to going down to break your fast? I think it would probably do you good, and it will be best to behave as normal as possible."

She had no desire for food. The thought of it alone was enough to make her feel ill, but she held out some hope that she might see Sebastian and speak with him. Her hopes were dashed, however, for Amelia confirmed that he had gone out.

Wisely, she refrained from telling Kathryn that he had gone to make certain his affairs were in order.

They retired to the salon where they spent most of their days after breakfast and Kathryn soon discovered she had to endure visitors. She managed to make it through the majority of the morning calls but finally excused herself with a headache and went up to



her room when she felt that she had maintained her façade of normalcy as long as she could bear it.

The afternoon was worse, for they took a 'turn' in the park and again Kathryn had to call up acting skills to get through it. She was relieved beyond measure when they returned home at last.

Amelia was looking far brighter than when they had left. "I am almost afraid to say it, but I do believe that no one has a clue of what happened--or even that something did happen last evening."

Dredging up a smile, because she knew how important it was to Amelia, not because she particular cared for herself, Kathryn excused herself once they were inside and went upstairs.

Lynette joined her in her room a little later, lifting her eyebrows when she saw that Kathryn was packing her trunk. "We are not leaving for Bath for another week, dearest. Your time would be better spent with mending."

Kathryn glanced at Lynette but found she could not even summon a weak smile of greeting. "We are not going to Bath."

"We are not?" Lynette asked, dismay threading her voice.

Kathryn shook her head. "I should have told you before, I suppose. It was not right to say nothing. I wrote to Mr. Winston weeks ago telling him I meant to go to look for Dermot."

After glancing around a little vaguely, Lynette found a chair and settled into it weakly. "You are not thinking clearly, dearest."

"Probably not," Kathryn said. "But I can not stay here, and my machinations have created a terrible tangle. Legally, Sebastian is my guardian and can command me to return to him."

Lynette frowned unhappily. "I am afraid I can not follow your reasoning at all, Kathryn."

Kathryn stared down at the gown in her hands and finally dropped it into the trunk and moved to the bed to settle. "I do not know how Sebastian feels about me, Lynette, but I do know how I feel about him. I love him more dearly than anything or anyone. This ... situation is not something that I can endure. I may have already cost him his life. I pray not, but I will never again take the chance that I could cause harm to come to him."

"But ... you said that you had written to Mr. Winston weeks ago."

"I had made up my mind that I would go anyway once the season was over if Sebastian had not asked me to marry him, and I had given up hope that he would." She shrugged, smiling faintly. "Mostly given up hope. I was afraid that he might become involved in a duel on my account. I do not think I really and truly believed it, but I knew it was a possibility because he had suggested as much when he told me he had warned Lord Stanwyke away from me.

"I can not relieve him of the responsibility for me in any other way. You must see that! And I can not continue this charade that I am searching madly for a husband when the truth is I do not want one ... not if it is not Sebastian.

"I am sorry to ask this of you, Lynette, but I need you. I can not travel alone."

Lynette looked terrified. "A sea voyage?" she asked weakly. "Oh Kathryn! Could we not just flee to Elk Park?"

Kathryn scooted off the bed and went to Lynette. "I can not. He will come there. You know that. I will be compelled to go with him because of the stupid game that I played, using Dermot's papers to appoint him my guardian and then using that to trap him into allowing me to stay. And I am justly served for it! I do not know if I am selfish in my wish to escape and spare myself more pain, or not. I can not think at all clearly. But I do know that this will be best for both him and for me, even if it is selfishness that motivates me. I have cut up his peace enough. I have very nearly ruined his life. If he ... if he does not die because of me it will be a miracle.

"I just want to give him back what I took from him. I want him to have his peace again, and his freedom."

Lynette sighed, patting Kathryn's cheek. "I do not know how it is that you can make the most unreasonable things sound so very reasonable, Kathryn. When are we to leave?"

"I want to stay until I know he is all right. I think I would go mad with wondering if I did not stay that long, at least."

Lynette nodded. "But--the voyage?"

Kathryn frowned. "I have not heard from Mr. Winston yet. But I will have to see what needs to be done to settle things at Elk Park before we go."

Lynette studied her doubtfully. "I am as certain as I can be that Lord Huntington will be hot on our heels once he discovers you have gone. You do not know him at all well if you think otherwise."

"Mayhap," Kathryn said. "But even if he does, I will stand my ground and insist on going to find Dermot. I think it will not be too hard to convince him that it will be better for me to go. And if he can not be convinced, then I will only make the arrangements anyway and slip away when I must.

"And once I have found Dermot, then it will not matter anymore, for Sebastian can not be my guardian if my father is still alive."

Lynette caught Kathryn's hands in hers. "We may not find Dermot, child! What will we do then in that wild place?"

Kathryn smiled. "Live, Lynette. We shall live there. You will be my widowed mother and we will live very comfortably."

"We will not have the protection of a man!"

Kathryn looked at her teasingly. "Then you will have to marry. I have decided that I am not at all cut out to be a wife. I am far too headstrong and I would drive any man to distraction."

The packing, contrary to Kathryn's hopes, did not serve as a distraction from her worries. She spent the remainder of the day putting things in and taking them out again. She lay awake most of the night. She wanted to see Sebastian so badly she felt ill, but she was afraid even to try to see him. Despite what Lynette had said, it was her carelessness that had caused this entire mess, and her blind determination to have her way. She did not doubt that Sebastian blamed her. Men always blamed the woman as a temptress no matter what, and she could not claim innocence. It did not make it any better that she had not planned for any of this to happen.

She hated herself for it. She was never going to be able to forgive herself if anything happened to him.

When dawn came, she moved to her window to watch as Sebastian left the house in the carriage that had arrived to take him to the dueling field. She stayed by the window watching even after the carriage had vanished from sight, counting off the minutes in painful heartbeats, wondering if it would simply stop if the carriage brought his lifeless body back to her.

In a just and fair world, it would. She would be spared having to live with it, but she knew better than most that the world was not just or fair. If had been just or fair, her mother would not have died as she had for a crime she had certainly not committed by herself.

Dermot had asked her once why she did not hate him for it. She had told him he hated himself enough and he had cried, wept like a child because he had loved her and they had lied to him. They had told him they had married her off and paid her husband to take her to the continent to live. And he had believed them and hated her mother for betraying him.

She had always thought it was the most romantic thing in the world that her father had loved her mother so much that he could not bring himself to marry another woman, that he had spent his life suffering over the love he had lost.

It was not at all romantic though, she realized. It was hell.

She knew why Dermot had fled. It was because he could not bear to torture himself any more, because every time he looked at her he thought about her mother and wished he had done something differently, wished he could go back and change things.

She knew because she felt the same way now.

She could not stop loving Sebastian anymore than her father had ever been able to stop loving her mother, but she did not want to have a hand in his death if she could help it.

She closed her eyes, slipping slowly to the floor and leaning her forehead against the glass, trying to bargain with any deity that might be willing to listen.

She had no idea how long she waited by the window but slowly the sky brightened and the sun moved higher and higher and her body began to cramp from sitting so still so long. She tried not to think what it could mean that they had had no word.

She was trying to struggle to her feet when she saw a servant hurry along the sidewalk and turn up the walkway that led to the house. Her legs very nearly gave out under her then, but she managed to get to her feet and hurried to the stairs as she heard the servant at the front door.

When the butler had taken the missive, he turned and headed toward the salon. Kathryn followed, finding that Amelia and Lynette were both waiting. Resisting the urge to race over and snatch the missive from Amelia's hands, she wilted into a chair as Amelia, as white faced as she knew she was, broke the seal with shaking hands and opened the letter.

She looked up after a moment. "It is from Sebastian! He says that he will not be dinning with us this evening, but we must not be concerned for he will be in later in the evening."

Tears of relief flooded Kathryn's eyes. "He said nothing else?"

Amelia shook her head, gazing at Kathryn sympathetically. After a moment, she brightened. "He is too cryptic by far!" she exclaimed shaking the letter. "He is all right and he will not have to flee the country!"

"You are certain?" Kathryn asked, hardly daring to believe it.

"Very! You may be certain if he had ... if he had to concern himself with leaving there would have been instructions for us to pack, or something of that nature!"

Weak with relief, Kathryn finally pushed herself from her chair and went upstairs again, collapsing on her bed and dropping almost instantly to sleep.

It was dark when Lynette woke her. Kathryn blinked at the light emanating from the branch of candles Lynette had brought with her. "I hated to wake you when I knew you could not have slept last night, but you have not eaten today. Would you like me to help you dress so that you can join Amelia and me for dinner?"

Kathryn groaned. "What time is it?"

"Time for dinner," Lynette replied promptly, a smile in her voice.

She did not really feel up to going through all the trouble of dressing for dinner, but she got up anyway as Lynette summoned a servant to light the gas lights. She felt better when she had bathed, still drained and listless, but better than she had since ... before.

She could not summon any enthusiasm for choosing the gown she was to wear, however, and Lynette finally chose one herself and helped Kathryn to dress and fix her hair as she had always done before they moved to the house in town. "I always enjoyed doing this," Lynette murmured. "It will be nice to have things the way they were before."

Kathryn met her gaze in the looking glass and realized that Lynette was trying to bring some optimism into the room, either for herself or for Kathryn. She managed a smile. "Yes. It will be nice to go home again. Have you packed the trunks?"

"Yes, and I had them taken down already, as well. I told Mr. Meeks that we were sending your old wardrobe home as there was no sense in hauling it about and you would not be needing the things anymore."

Kathryn lifted her brows in surprise. "Did he believe you?"

Lynette smiled primly. "Not at first, but I told him you were rather eccentric and you had families back home that you always donated your old clothing to, and he did not question that."

Kathryn could not help but chuckle. "Because he knows I am strange, I suppose?"

Lynette finished pinning her hair and dropped a hand to her shoulder. "Are you quite sure you want to do this, Kathryn?"

Kathryn smiled wryly. "I do not want to in the worse sort of way, Lynette, but I believe it will be for the best and I must act on that." She sighed. "In any case, I made a bargain with God that if he would only take care of Sebastian for me and keep him from harm that I would gladly sacrifice all hope of happiness and go."

Lynette smiled faintly. "You have not a religious bone in your body, my dear!"

Kathryn's face grew serious. "Fate, God, providence, or sheer good fortune--I do not know or care what protected him, only that he is all right, and I prefer not to test my luck, tempt fate, or fly in the face of providence by going back on my word. In any case,

when you love someone you are supposed to do what is right and best for them, even if it is not the best thing or the right thing for you.

“We will be fine, Lynette. I give you my word. You know I am my father’s daughter and very nearly as resourceful as he is!”

## Chapter Sixteen

Kathryn's hands were clammy with nerves as she stood outside of Sebastian's door, one ear pressed to the panel to listen for any movement. When she heard nothing, she tried the knob.

It was almost terrifying to discover that it was not locked for then she had no excuse to give up and return to her own room.

After glancing up and down the hallway again, she eased the door open and went inside, closing it carefully behind her.

She had not entirely believed that Sebastian was completely all right, or that he would come home.

He had been drunk when he had. She had not seen him, but she had heard him when his valet and another manservant helped him upstairs and into bed.

And she had truly breathed easy at last.

And then she had begun to think that she might never see him again after tomorrow and she had begun to think that she could see him, just one last time, if she had the nerve to sneak into his room because she knew what men were like when they were in their cups. Dermot had rolled off of his bed one night and hit the floor so hard the whole house had shaken and he had not even stirred.

She could sit with him a while and he would never even know that she had been with him.

She was not afraid of Sebastian. She had seen him in his cups before, more than once, when he had visited Elk Park. He was never belligerent as some of Dermot's friends were when they drank heavily.

She was fearful of his displeasure, though. She wanted a good memory to take with her. She did not want him to be cross with her.

Unfortunately, it was very dark in the room. When her eyes had adjusted a little, and she could pick out the furniture in the darkness, she moved to the window and pushed the drapes back enough to allow a little light into the room.

A jolt went through her when she turned around, for Sebastian was sprawled limply across his bed without a stitch of clothing on--and no cover. She did not know why it had not occurred to her that he might sleep naked, except that Dermot did not.

At least, she did not think Dermot slept naked.

He had nightshirts. She had mended them before, which meant that he must wear them at least some of the time.

A faint smile quirked at one corner of her lips.

He did not look at all the same as when he had his clothes on, so cool and formal and proper. He looked so much more--approachable.

After a moment, she moved closer. She had forgotten, she realized, the sheer, manly beauty of his body. Actually, she supposed she had not forgotten, precisely. It was just that she had never seen him quite so clearly. She had always peeped at him before, and he had always been wrapped around some woman and tangled in the sheets.

The moment those thoughts popped into her mind, she knew why she had really come. He was drunk and he was never going to be more vulnerable. She had wanted so badly to be with him, had dreamed about it for years. She felt like she would never forgive herself if she did not take what she had the chance to take.

He would be furious with her, she knew, but she also knew that the odds were strongly in her favor that, by tomorrow morning when he woke, he would not be at all certain what had happened.

He might remember that it had been her in his bed, and he might not.

Of course, there was also the possibility that he was dead drunk, she thought with amusement, and she would be the one disappointed, but she did not think she would be disappointed even if he only rolled over on top of her and snored. She would still have gotten to lie naked next to him, to feel his big body on hers, to know what it felt like to lie with him even if he did not couple with her.

That was why her hands were clammy with fear when she had stood outside, not because she was afraid of Sebastian but because she was afraid she would not have the nerve to do what she wanted to do.

She had only to recall what it had felt like when he kissed to know that she wanted to do this. After a moment's thought, she moved back to his door and locked it, realizing that it would be a very, very uncomfortable thing if his valet should come back for some reason.

When she had locked the door, she unfastened her gown and dropped it to the floor and then her pantalets and moved to the bed naked. He had not stirred. He was laying face down, his head twisted to one side, his hair tousled and drooping over his face.

Anticipation and excitement filled her even as she paused beside the bed to look down at him. Placing her knee carefully on the bed, she crawled slowly up on the mattress and settled beside him--just lay staring into his sleeping face for many moments. Finally, she lifted a hand and stroked it slowly down his back.

His skin was surprisingly warm considering he had been sleeping without even a sheet. It felt silky, smooth. Even as relaxed as he was, however, the muscles beneath were firm. She pushed herself up to one elbow after a moment, studying his back as she explored it with her fingertips.

He twitched.

Her lips curled.

There was life!

Leaning down, she kissed his shoulder lightly.

He jerked that time, pushed himself up with one arm and peered at her through the hair hanging down over his face, his eyes little more than slits. She lay back down, holding her breath.

He collapsed again, this time turning his face into his pillow and uttering a groan. When he did nothing more for several moments, she reached for him again, stroking her fingers through his tumbled hair and then slowly down his back until she reached his rounded buttocks. Deciding she liked the taut, rounded mounds, she shifted a little closer to reach him better, and rubbed her palm over the plump cheeks, massaging them.

"Din we do it yet?" he muttered into his pillow, the words so slurred she had trouble deciphering them at first.

Suppressing a smile, she leaned over him to kiss his back, brushing her breasts along his shoulder. "Not yet," she murmured.

"Not able," he growled.

She sighed, struggling with her disappointment. "That's all right." Inching closer to him, she pressed her body to his and tried to lay as still as possible so that she did not disturb him further. She quickly discovered, though, that it was not possible. It felt good to be snuggled against him, to feel his naked skin against hers, but she could not resist touching him. After several moments had passed and she thought he had dozed off again, she stroked her hand down his back as she had before.

He shifted abruptly, pushing her onto her back, dragging her beneath him and burrowing his face against her throat.

Kathryn tensed at the sudden move and then sighed blissfully when he settled, feeling pleasure and excitement pumping through her as his hot breath caressed her neck. A moment passed and she had just decided that he had simply wanted to subdue her exploration when his hand landed on her shoulder and moved downward until his palm was cupped over her breast. He squeezed it experimentally and then continued his exploration downward, over her torso and belly to the nest of curls on her woman's mound and then upward again along her hip, following the outward curve to the dip of her waist, following the more gentle outward slope above her waist across her ribs and finally cupping the breast he had examined before. By the time he had finished his preliminary charting of her body, Kathryn was already beginning to feel light headed, for he had stirred every inch of flesh he had explored to tingling, keen sensation.

She dragged in a shaky breath as he shifted downward, nuzzling her chest with his face as if searching. The breath left her as if it had been punched from her lungs as he opened his mouth over the tip of the breast he had explored thoroughly with his face. Finding her nipple with his tongue, he sucked on it. Her flesh prickled all over her breasts, the nipple beneath his tongue and the one beneath his palm tightening into almost painfully hard knots as blood rushed into them. Strange, never before felt sensations flowed into her from his mouth, into her breast, and then downward into her belly, warming her blood and then flesh.

She tilted her head to look down at him, watching the movements of his mouth and cheeks as he suckled her breast. He lifted his mouth after a moment and she watched his tongue as it circled the turgid tip, flicked at it with a leisurely thoroughness that was unaccountably exciting. The sensations magnified. Warmth became heat. The strange, unfamiliar prickling became a tightening, a coiling of some internal tension.

She dragged in a shaky breath, lying back, squeezing her eyes closed and focusing her mind on the feel of his mouth as he covered the tip again and sucked it. By degrees, the sensations strengthened until it had gone from curious, to pleasurable, to intoxicating and a restlessness had invaded her so that she could no longer remain perfectly still. She had begun to breathe in little gasps, for the coiling tension seemed to tighten around her lungs, making it impossible to drag in more than a snatch of air at the time.

And just when she had begun to feel as if the sensations had gone beyond bearing, he shifted again. Switching palm and mouth from one breast to the other, he finessed her other nipple as he had the first until the world seemed to whirl about in her mind, until it had narrowed to that one tiny focus where delicious sensation poured into her body and pooled within her belly in a liquid tide of want.



Releasing the breast he had been massaging with his hand, he tucked that arm beneath him to support his weight and shifted again. This time when his hand coasted down her body it went straight to the focus of her burgeoning need. His fingers tangled briefly in the curls at the apex of her thighs, slipped downward. The back of his hand nudged at one thigh. Comprehension was slow in coming, but when it did, her heart slammed into her chest painfully hard. She slipped her foot up the bed, opening herself to him, gasping as she felt his fingers parting the flesh, exploring her moist cleft.

Unerringly, he found the place that ached for him, pushing a finger inside of her.

It felt indescribably good and she arched her head back, gasping sharply, panting for breath as she felt him pushing his finger deeply inside of her. He withdrew it slightly, then pushed again.

She caught his arm, digging her fingers into the hard flesh as he pushed a second finger inside her. Her hips lifted to meet his exploration almost without volition.

“Sebastian!” she gasped. “Come inside of me. I need to feel you.”

He withdrew his fingers. Releasing the nipple he had been teasing, he burrowed his face into the pillow next to hers as he moved over her, settling his hips between hers as she dragged her other leg up and spread her thighs wide for him. Grasping his engorged member with his hand, he guided it along her cleft, pressed the rounded head into her opening, stretching her. She moaned, tipping her hips up eagerly, clutching at his shoulders as he eased the pressure slightly and pushed again, sinking a little deeper, stretching her a little more, sinking into her by agonizingly slow inches.

Encountering a barrier he had obviously not expected, he halted abruptly and lifted his head at last to stare down at her.

\* \* \* \*

The duel with Stanwyke was by no means the first Sebastian had been involved in. But it was the first challenge he had issued himself. And it was the first duel he had engaged in since he had left what he considered his reckless youth behind when he had matured beyond the belief in his own invincibility and come to the uncomfortable realization that he was as mortal as the friends he had once had that had met their end on the dueling field.

His fury over what Stanwyke had done had carried him through it, but his relief afterward that he had come through it without any new holes in his head, or anywhere else, was profound. He was almost as relieved that he had managed to exercise his restraint, and his aim had not been off, when he had fired at Stanwyke. He would not have minded blowing the man’s head off, but he did not particularly care for the idea of fleeing to the continent to avoid prosecution.

Thus he had spent the remainder of his day and much of his evening celebrating life and freedom, and brooding over whether or not he had interrupted a consensual assignation that had ended in an ugly fight between two lovers, or if it had been what it appeared to be and what Kathryn had claimed it was.

He did not think that he really believed in his heart of hearts that Kathryn would have taken Stanwyke as a lover, and he knew that he was too jealous to think rationally about it, but the jealousy made it impossible for him to simply dismiss his ugly suspicions. Kathryn had hinted more than once that she was no innocent in the ways of the world. He thought she had far more knowledge than she should have, but he did not

think it went beyond a working knowledge. He thought that, in as far as experience, she was as innocent as she looked.

If he could have been certain he would have felt far better about it.

And the doubt was part of the reason he had not wanted to risk returning to Clermont Street until Kathryn had had time to collect herself, because he was not certain whether Kathryn had been distraught over the possibility that he might get himself killed, or that he might kill Stanwyke.

If it was Stanwyke she had been distraught over, he might well be tempted to go back and challenge the man again.

The end result had been that it took a hell of a lot more bourbon to drown the doubts than he was accustomed to partaking of. But he had persevered enthusiastically until he had been well into his cups before he had summoned a hackney to carry him to Clermont Street.

He thought he had gone home.

He was less certain of it when he roused to discover a naked woman in his bed. He had ignored it at first, convinced that it was some combination of too much Kathryn, too much drink, and no outlet for his sexual frustrations in far too damned long--since, in fact, Kathryn had come into his life and turned it upside down and he had booted Clarendra out of his bed.

It was not Clarendra. He was certain of that much. He was fairly certain that the woman could also not be Kathryn, but in his current state, he thought it was and he finally decided that was close enough. She was warm and willing and he was still drunk enough to perceive her as Kathryn and he had tortured himself long enough with fantasies.

The moment he dragged her beneath him and felt the softness of her breasts pressed against him he lost all touch with reality and any desire to control the hunger that swallowed the last thread of reason. He had teased her breasts until she had begun to moan and beg him to take her. He had been far more interested up until that point in thoroughly exploring her body, in indulging his fantasy to the fullest, but the moment he had discovered how wet she was for him, he had forgotten every other consideration.

From the moment she had gasped his name and begged him to take her, told him she needed his flesh inside of her, his mind and body were on fire. When he discovered how tight she was, found that despite the dampness that should have eased his way he had to struggle even to breach her opening, he began to think he was going to disgrace himself and spill his seed before he could thrust into her.

Gritting his teeth against imminent release, he had caught her hips more tightly and pushed harder.

Absolute bafflement washed over him when he had managed to thrust little more than the head of his cock inside of her and discovered he could go no further. Between the lingering effects of the alcohol he had consumed, the dregs of sleep and his conviction that he was indulging a fantasy, and the lust that was pounding through him until he had lost what little mind remained to him, several moments passed before he could even entirely grasp that he had reached an obstruction.

There was no doubt at all, though, that he had his cock firmly wedged in a woman.

The most logical conclusion was almost as stunning as the fact that it was there at all, though, and he lifted his head for the first time and really looked at the woman writhing beneath him, staring for several moments while he waited for his mind to clear enough for the fantasy image to dissipate.

It did not vanish. It was Kathryn looking up at him with need from beneath slumberous half closed eyes.

His mind instantly went into chaos, leaving him wide open to the mindless need so that it closed over him again, nearly choking him. He struggled to catch his breath, fought to regain control of his desire. But even the abrupt realization that he had been duped, that he had been manipulated could not cool the fire in his blood or the thundering need pounding in his skull.

For several moments he teetered between absolute control and the absolute absence of it, trying to recover enough wit and strength to save himself from her machinations. He lost, could not find the will to withdraw even though his mind was screaming at him that he had to, that he could not culminate what he had started. Uttering a groan of surrender, he covered her mouth with his and drove past her maidenhead, absorbing her sharp gasp into his mouth, plundering the moist cavern with his tongue even as he withdrew along her passage and thrust into her again.

He was too mindless to be able to tell whether her shaking and the gasps and moans and bucking against him were her efforts to break free or the results of her own needs, but his body interpreted it as reciprocal desire and ripped away what little control he had left. Nearing blackout from the inability to catch a decent breath, he tore his mouth from hers, gasping in a harsh breath.

She dragged in a breath on a keen cry, arching her head back into the pillow, her body arching upward in seizure. A low, almost animal cry emerged from her throat and then she began to claw at his shoulders, quaking, shuddering, groaning. He felt his own body seize in response to her cries of ecstasy, to the clenching of her passage around his engorged flesh. The convulsions punched the breath from his lungs in a hoarse grunt. Struggling to breathe, he drove into her faster and faster, compelled by his instincts to expel his seed deeply inside of her, thrusting until his body ceased to convulse and the waves of rapture leached the strength from him. Every muscle in his body began to quiver with the insidious advance of weakness until he realized dimly that he was going to crush her with his weight if he collapsed on top of her. Summoning enough strength for one last push, he shifted the bulk of his weight onto the bed beside her.

The darkness of oblivion began to ease over him before his heart had ceased to hammer frantically and his breath had evened. Without remorse or any attempt to resist the lure, he sank into it.

## Chapter Seventeen

Kathryn drifted blissfully for a time, reluctant to give up the warmth and sheer heaven that engulfed her as the waves of exquisite pleasure began to dissipate. Cognitive thought was beyond her for a time, but she knew the sense of pleasure and triumph was more than the product of absolute release.

Sebastian's weight still rested against her, the heat and perspiration from their lovemaking slowly leaching from his body. With a tremendous effort, she lifted a hand and stroked his body lovingly, basking in the joy of knowing that she had given herself to the man she loved.

More than anything, she wanted to curl up against him and follow him into deep slumber, but she was not so far gone that she did not realize that she could not. She had to leave before he woke and realized what she had done.

Uneasiness crept into her at that thought, for she vaguely remembered that moment when he had halted abruptly and lifted his head to study her. For several unnerving moments she had feared that he realized who she was and what she had done, but he had thrust that anxiety from her mind when he had driven into her with such desperation.

She was fairly certain he would figure it out, eventually, but she had counted on him not figuring it out before she had gotten what she wanted.

The pain had been unexpected. She knew about the maidenhead. She had heard Dermot and friends mention it, but she had thought it was more of a rite of passage, or a metaphor for a woman who had not yet been with a man. She had not thought it was an actual 'thing' that must be breeched.

It was immaterial now, of course, and the pain had not prevented her from enjoying Sebastian's masterful possession of her body thoroughly.

Reluctantly, she slipped from beneath him after a time, knowing she had to go before the servants began to stir.

The stickiness between her thighs was another unexpected discovery, but it dawned on her after a moment that it was his seed and her heart swelled at the thought. Sighing ecstatically, she dressed herself, checked the corridor carefully, and then went quickly to her own room leaping into her bed and trying to smother the joy that threatened to bubble from her as laughter.

It was hard to compose herself for sleep, but finally she found it.

Lynette woke her a few hours later in the predawn of morning, hissing at her from the doorway. Still groggy with sleep, Kathryn pushed herself upright and tried to peer through the gloom in the room.

"You are just like your father," Lynette hissed irritably when she had stumbled blindly across the room and found the foot of the bed with her shin. "Cool as ice, no matter what the situation. How you could have overslept when we have conspired to confound your guardian and flee, I can not imagine! I have been up half the night in a knot of nerves!"

The mention of Sebastian lifted the corners of Kathryn's lips dreamily. She flopped back against her pillows, stretching, luxuriating in the sense of well being that filled her at the memories that flooded back into her mind.

"You are not going back to sleep!"

Kathryn sighed. "No. I will get up and dress myself. You go down and have one of the servants summon a hackney for us." Pushing herself upright once more, she studied Lynette thoughtfully as the woman made her way to the door again. "Can you do it without looking at him as if he is a constable and you have just robbed a vendor?"

Lynette sent her an indignant look. "I am not half as cool headed as you are. I admit it, but I shall manage!"

Satisfied with that assurance, Kathryn got up and bathed herself and dressed in a morning frock she thought would be suitable for a morning of 'shopping'. When she had arranged her hair in a simple upsweep on the back of her head, she stared at the two notes she had written the night before meditatively.

She had not felt that it would be right to leave without a word. Both Sebastian and Amelia were bound to be distressed that she would flee their protection when they had certainly done nothing to deserve such a betrayal of their trust. But she was still not completely easy about leaving the notes.

They would know soon enough that she had left, with or without the notes. She did not, however, want them to discover it for a while, not until she and Lynette were beyond the city at least for they would be traveling by coach and they would need a good head start if they were not to be stopped along the road by Sebastian, who could travel much faster on horseback.

It would probably not take them long to figure out that she and Lynette had gone to Elk Park, for that matter, but she was hoping that if they realized that it was too late to stop it they would reconsider whether it was something they actually wanted to stop or not.

Regardless, she was sure that even if they did come pounding after her, once she was holed up in Elk Park, she would be in a far better position to reason with them.

It occurred to her after a moment that the maids generally did not get around to cleaning her room until nearly noon, and she decided that would be enough time. She could leave the notes on the vanity table for the maid to give them. With any luck, the maid would not be in any particular hurry to do so.

She had already stacked the two notes and stood them against the mirror when it dawned on her that she had written the note to Sebastian before they had made love. Deciding she should add just a few words regarding that, she broke the seal and spread the page, thinking. Finally, she decided that it would probably be for the best if she wrote something fairly cryptic that would not be too obvious should anyone else get the note and read it.

At the bottom, she wrote: Thank you! It was everything I ever dreamed it would be. I shall be eternally grateful and ever yours, Kathryn.

After studying it again, she wondered if that would be just a little too cryptic. Scratching through the last line, she wrote below it: I shall be eternally grateful for all that you have done for me, ever yours, Kathryn.

Certain that he could not fail to realize what she was hinting at, she resealed the note and stacked it behind the one for Amelia.

Getting to her feet, she looked around the room that had come to feel so much like home one last time and then gathered her cloak and bag and went downstairs to join Lynette. The hackney was waiting and Lynette was watching as their trunks were loaded.

“There you are!” Lynette exclaimed with obvious relief.

Kathryn smiled easily. “The shops will not open for at least an hour!”

Taking her cue, Lynette smiled back. “But we must go to send the trunks off first, and we do not want to arrive much after the shops have opened or we will find everything picked over!”

Kathryn could have kissed her for her perfectly executed performance. Instead, she turned to the footman as Lynette was helped into the cab and told him to be sure to tell Amelia that they did not expect to be back before luncheon and possibly not even then.

Dismissing the hackney once they had arrived at the coaching house and he had unloaded their trunks, they went inside to discover if the coach that had been arranged was ready. Surprised but pleased to discover that they had arrived punctually, the station master had their trunks loaded straight away and they found themselves leaving the outskirts of London before Amelia had even come down to break her fast.

“There!” Kathryn announced. “There was nothing to it. You see?”

Lynette’s expression was anything but relieved. “You do not think that it was too easy?”

Kathryn forced a chuckle, but the truth was depression had begun to set in and she did not really feel like trying to reassure Lynette. “I see you believe in providence, as well! I think that it is very doubtful that Sebastian will come charging after us with murder in his eyes, if that is what is distressing you.”

“Oh!” Lynette murmured, looking appalled. “You think he will not?”

She found herself wishing desperately that he would, that he would drag her from the coach and tell her he had realized the very moment she left that he could not bear to live without her.

It was impossible to think of anything at all to support that fantasy, though.

“No. I do not think he will,” she said firmly. “I hope you will not mind if I doze? I did not rest at all well last night.”

Ignoring the indignant look Lynette sent her, she shifted around on the seat until she had found a relatively comfortable position and surprised herself by falling asleep.

“Nerves of steel!” Lynette muttered to herself. “Oh, for but half the girl’s confidence!”

\* \* \* \*

Sebastian cringed as light stabbed through his eyelids like daggers driven straight into his brain. “What time is it?” he growled in a voice still slurred with sleep, wincing as the sound of his own voice sent waves of pain through his aching head.

“Noonish,” his valet replied.

“Did I summon you?” Sebastian asked, managing to pry one eyelid open and glare at the man standing over him through one bloodshot eye.

Shaken from his customary composure, it took Stanley a moment to respond.

“No sir,” he finally said.

“Then get the hell out!”

"I ... uh ... I beg your pardon, my lord. But I understood that you had not been wounded in your recent ... uh ... dispute?"

Sebastian stared at the man as if he had grown two heads. After a moment, however, he followed the direction of Stanley's gaze. Discovering nothing but a blur, he opened both eyes and struggled for several moments to focus them, and finally levered himself up off the bed to put a little more distance between himself and the stained sheet before he saw what it was the valet was staring at. And even then he felt perfectly blank when he first saw the brownish red streaks.

Under the circumstances, it might have taken him longer to figure out what it was except that Stanley had been considerate enough to suggest a wound. Comprehension dawned, slowly, but with horrible clarity. "Bloody hell!"

He collapsed again, dragging a pillow over his splitting skull. "Come back in an hour ... and draw me a bath," he muttered, his voice muffled against the bed.

"Very good, my lord." Stanley withdrew.

He hardly noticed the valet's departure. His brain, already struggling with the worst hangover he could recall, was having trouble grasping the implications. Clearly, though, what he had hoped was some sort of fantasy turned nightmare had actually happened in his bed not in his mind.

He squeezed his eyes closed. "That incorrigible little minx!" he muttered furiously. He was in his own damned bed and he sure as hell had not been in any condition to drag her into it!

He could not believe that he had been duped by a chit scarcely out of the school room! Snared in parson's trap by a girl young enough ... Well she was not that damned young! Dermot was scarcely old enough to be her father and he was a sight younger than Dermot! But damn it to hell he resented being manipulated into something he was not at all sure he wanted!

He got up after a few moments and stalked to the bell pull, yanking on it several times and then opening the door to bellow down the corridor for his damned valet, whom he had discovered could be counted upon to disappear at any time he needed him. Pain exploded inside his head, and reverberated when he capped that by slamming the door, but he welcomed it because it whipped up his justifiable rage.

He was standing in the middle of the room, his legs braced apart, his hands on his hips, staring at the bed darkly when Stanley finally appeared. He had a glass in his hand. "A little cure of mine, my lord."

Sebastian snatched it out of the man's hand and downed it in one gulp, then made a face. "What the hell was that?"

Stanley blinked at him. "A number of things, actually, a bit of ...."

"Never mind," Sebastian snapped, cutting him off. "Remove the linens and either launder them yourself or burn them."

Stanley gaped at him. "Very good, my lord," he responded after a moment, moving to the bed and beginning to snatch the offending linens off and bundle them.

"Is my bath ready?"

Stanley managed to refrain from either gaping at him this time or pointing out that Sebastian had ordered him out not fifteen minutes earlier with instructions not to disturb him again for at least an hour. "I will just check on that, my lord," he said with as much aplomb as he could muster, heading toward the door with the linens.

“You’d best prepare the master’s bath and be quick about it,” he informed the upstairs maids as he strode past them. “His lordship is in a black humor this morning, very black.”

Hearing the maids in the room next door preparing his bath, Sebastian finally shook himself and moved to his wardrobe, rifling through it until he found a robe and shrugging into it. His knuckle brushed something rough along his shoulder as he adjusted the neck and he crossed the room to the mirror. Shrugging the robe off one shoulder he turned his back to the mirror and craned his neck to look behind him. His eyes widened and then narrowed as he stared at the long scratch across his shoulder blade.

A cold sweat broke from his pores.

Scrubbing a hand over his face, he stroked his bristled jaw pensively for a moment and finally strode to the decanter on his bedside table. Pouring himself a finger of bourbon, he studied it skeptically and added a second one, struggling to shake the horrifying thought that had come to mind. Downing the drink in a couple of gulps, he set the tumbler down and began pacing, trying to recall what he could of the night before.

He had been bloody well into his cups when he came in. He remembered that much because he had discovered he needed the assistance of two footmen to negotiate the stairs. He did not even clearly recall undressing for bed. The next remotely clear thing that he remembered was looking down to discover Kat beneath him and feeling rage surge through him because he knew, at that moment, that she had tricked him.

He felt a little nauseated when it occurred to him he had been so bloody drunk he did not have a clue of whether he was right or not. He had thought he had either been having one hell of a powerful fantasy, or he had climbed into some woman’s bed. Everything had felt so real--well, it bloody well had been real. The thing he was not certain about was the most critical details.

He thought he remembered Kat moaning and writhing in ecstasy beneath him. Remembering it was enough to make him hard again.

But what if it had not been ecstasy at all, he thought, losing his painful erection in the next moment? What if she had been trying to fight him off?

God! His poor darling kitten! He had behaved like an animal.

She was never going to forgive him if he done what he was afraid he had done.

What the hell would she have been doing in his bed, naked, if she had not come to seduce him, he thought in the next moment?

Was the scratch passion?

But if it was, why had the sheets been damned thoroughly streaked with virgin’s blood?

He did not know what to think!

Heading toward his bath after a bit, he shrugged out of his robe and climbed in, and then merely sat staring into space and going over and over what he could remember, trying to pick up details he might have missed.

She had been naked when she climbed into the bed, he thought angrily. He damned well knew she had, and moreover she had been all over him. That was what had woken him up!



The scheming hussy! Undoubtedly, she had known he was in his cups and ripe for her machinations! Which he had no doubt led to an aisle, a parson, a house and a half dozen curtain climbers!

Damn it to hell! He had been thinking about it! Mostly because he had realized that that was the only way he was going to get his hands on her, and he had been mad to get his hands on her.

He resented the hell out of being pushed, though, damn it! He would have come around in his own good time!

Realizing finally that the water had grown downright cold while he sat in it, he bathed and got out. His valet was waiting in his room to shave him. Stalking to the chair, he sprawled in it, glaring at his bare toes.

Stanley draped a cloth around his neck and placed a warmed towel over his face to soften his whiskers. "I took the liberty of disposing of the evidence in the yard, my lord," Stanley informed him.

Sebastian felt heat creep into his face that had nothing to do with the towel. He glared at the man, but he hardly thought it worth the effort to quibble over whether it was 'evidence' or not.

He was caught, well and truly caught. He could rant and rave and damn her eyes all he wanted to, but she had him. The scheming, manipulative ....

It was almost a relief, actually, now that he thought on it. As furious as he was at being pushed, he knew damned well he had intended to have her all the time. He had been beating off potential suitors for her hand virtually ever since they had launched her into society. For weeks now, anyway.

Not that he intended to let her know that. She deserved to suffer over it, at least a little. She needed time to wonder whether her little scheme had worked, or if had backfired on her because he was too drunk to remember. She had had him dangling by his cock for weeks until he was the next thing to insane, had no notion of whether he was coming or going. It would be her just deserts to have to worry about whether or not he meant to make an honest woman out of her after he'd taken her maidenhead!

Not that he was even sure of that much, damn it to hell! Knowing Kathryn like he did now, he would not put it past her to douse his linens with beef blood or something!

And of that idiot Stanley had burned the 'evidence' so he was never going to find out!

When he was certain that his toilet was flawless, he left his room and headed downstairs. The house seemed inordinately quiet, however. After glancing into the small salon, he collared a passing servant. "Are the ladies out?"

The maid bobbed a curtsy and informed him that she did not know, but she would fetch Meeks.

Meeks informed him that Miss Kathryn and her companion had gone out to shop and Lady Amelia had gone off to visit Lady Hollywell.

Nodding curtly, Sebastian informed him that he was going out, as well, and did not know when he would be returning, but they should not hold dinner for him.

Furious that Kathryn had trumped him, he left the house and caught a hackney to his club. Two could play the game, he thought angrily. He would see how well she liked cooling her heels!

Three days later, heartily sick of camping out at his friend, Sir Anthony Blythe's flat, he made an unpleasant discovery when he strolled into his club and joined several friends for a game of cards.

"How is Miss Kathryn faring?" Lord Patterson inquired. "I hope it is nothing serious?"

Sebastian stared at the man for a full minute while that slowly sank in. "Nothing too serious .... Will you excuse me? I just remembered that I was promised for dinner."

Amelia was in the small salon when he reached the house. She leapt up from her chair the moment she saw him in the door. "Sebastian! I have been trying to reach you for days!" she gasped and then promptly burst into tears.

White faced, feeling abruptly weak-kneed, Sebastian closed the door behind him. "Out with it, woman!" he growled. "What is it?"

Amelia sniffed and glared at him over her hanky. "She is gone!"

Reeling already with shock, that dramatic announcement floored him. "Gone?" he echoed hoarsely.

"Not here! She has gone! Days ago! They will be half way to the colonies by now and I have searched for you everywhere!"

Sebastian looked around a little vaguely and found a chair. Collapsing in it, he dropped his elbows to his knees and speared his fingers through his hair, holding his pounding head. "I can not make any sense of what you are saying, Amelia. Tell me what happened--from the beginning."

Amelia burst into tears again. "It was the day after the duel. She told the servants that she was sending her old wardrobe home to disperse among the poor and that she and Lynette were going to shop after they had dropped the trunks off. I did not think anything of it until I returned in the afternoon and discovered she had not returned. I was already beside myself with worry that something had happened when one of the maids brought the notes."

Sebastian's head came up abruptly. "Notes?"

Amelia sniffed. "She left one for each of us."

He glared at her. "Why could you not have said that to begin with? Where is it?"

Pushing herself to her feet, Amelia went to a desk in one corner of the room and took two notes from a drawer. Sebastian, she discovered, had followed her. He snatched the one on top from her hand and tore it open, scanning the page.

He began cursing before he had even finished reading it. Amelia covered her ears. "Sebastian!"

He sent her a deadly look. "My god, Amelia! She said she was taking a ship to the colonies to find Dermot! And all you have done is sent a servant round to find me?"

"I sent them to make inquiries of outbound ships, as well! Credit me with a little sense! There were none in port at the time, and I have had someone stationed at the nearest ports ever since making inquiries! We had word that there was a merchant ship inbound from the Americas that was due to dock in Liverpool and take on supplies before they returned, but it had not yet arrived when I sent someone to check."

Sebastian scrubbed a hand over his face. "What did she say in your note?"

Amelia handed it to him and held her hand out for his note. He frowned at her but finally handed it over and read the note she had left Amelia. Unfortunately, beyond a few

personal lines she had penned specifically for Amelia there was nothing of any significance that he did not already know.

“What does she mean ‘all you have ever done’?” Amelia demanded.

Sebastian’s head snapped around. “What?”

“She stressed it here in the last line. She scratched out the one she had written before and changed it. I can not think what she would mean by that,” she added petulantly. “For I have certainly done all that I could!”

Sebastian snatched the note out of her hand and read the last line again, and then reread the line before it. ‘It was everything I ever dreamed it would be’.

He flushed. Stuffing the note into his jacket pocket, he turned on his heel and strode toward the door. “Pack! I need to think!”

“But ... for how many days? Where are we going?”

The door vibrated behind him. By the time Amelia had gotten to her feet and rushed to snatch it open, she was just in time to hear the door to his study slam firmly and resolutely behind him. After glaring at the panel for several moments, she summoned Meeks.

“Inform Mr. Stanley and Ophelia to pack a valise for Lord Huntington and me-- for perhaps a week. And then have them pack up everything else. We are closing up the house. We will send for the remainder of the luggage once we know where we will be staying.”

Meeks bowed, but hesitated.

“Yes?” Amelia asked tersely.

“I am ... deeply regretful that I did not realize before what Miss Kathryn had planned.”

Anger washed through her, but Amelia tamped it with an effort. “She is ... too clever by half! If I did not feel so guilty myself, I would dearly love to blame you for it, but ...,” she stopped abruptly as her chin wobbled, waving him away. “I can not imagine what possessed the girl!” she muttered to herself when Meeks had left.

Sebastian was very much afraid he knew what had possessed Kathryn. It was all he could think about for some time as he paced his study, cursing himself for every low thought he had entertained. He poured himself a drink after a while and sat down, reading the note over and over.

He became convinced after a bit that he was not just being optimistic. Kathryn had been trying to tell him she was not sorry about what had happened between them. He knew that had to be it, for he could see that she had written the rest of the note before that.

Thank you! It was everything I ever dreamed it would be. I shall be eternally grateful for all that you have done for me, ever yours, Kathryn.

He was not certain but what she had overdone that a tad. He could not imagine that he had performed well enough to be ‘everything she had ever dreamed’, for he had been bloody wasted.

Struggling to dismiss the fear that he had abused and terrorized his darling Kitten and driven her away, and not greatly reassured by those lines he thought might have been intended as a lover’s blessing, he tried to think where she might have gone.

If he found her he could bloody well ask her what the hell she had meant by it. After studying the note a while longer, he strode to the door and snatched it open, bellowing for Meeks.

Meeks appeared shortly behind the bellow. "You rang, my lord?"

Sebastian glared at him for the none too subtle reminder that there was a bell pull by the door, but he bloody well figured if he had to walk to the damned door anyway, he might just as well call as ring the stupid bell. "I need you to talk to the servants and discover if Miss Kathryn sent out any notes or letters over the past two weeks or so to anyone other than a local acquaintance."

Meeks nodded. "Lady Amelia already suggested it, my lord. I finally tracked down a servant who recalled posting a letter to a Mr. Winston, Esquire a little over a week ago."

Sebastian frowned. "Did you inquire after this Mr. Winston?"

"He is the solicitor who brought the papers of guardianship for Miss Kathryn," Meeks reminded him.

Sebastian waved him off and began pacing again once Meeks had closed the door. He was not certain what to make of that, but it seemed that she might have been making arrangements long before ....

Thrusting that from his mind, he tried to recall whether Mr. Winston was local or if he had come up from Elk Park with Kathryn. Halting abruptly, he stood staring into space for several moments, frowning as something that had been niggling at the back of his mind began to take form.

Moving back to his desk where he had left the note, he studied it again, this time looking at the handwriting rather than the words themselves. He had not given it a great deal of thought before, but the writing looked strangely familiar--and not at all like a lady's neat penmanship.

He was emptying the drawers of his desk when Amelia tapped on his door and finally stuck her head in when he did not respond. "What ever are you doing?"

"Looking for something," Sebastian responded absently. "I believe she has gone back to Elk Park," he added.

"You think it's possible?" Amelia gasped hopefully.

"I think it is likely," Sebastian said dryly. "For it is just the sort of thing that Kathryn would do. She is wild, and bold as be damned, I will grant you that, but even Kat would not be so reckless as to actually consider going off on such a voyage with only her paid companion! Besides, I can not think that she has had the time or opportunity to make arrangements....Ah!"

Amelia blinked. "What is it?"

"I knew I had one around here somewhere," Sebastian muttered, spreading the sheet on his desk and laying the note from Kathryn beside it.

Amelia sidled up next to him and peered at the two letters. "Is that a letter from Dermot?"

"It is," Sebastian said grimly.

"Mercy! Kathryn's hand is just like her father's!"

Sebastian's face was stony when he lifted his head. "Amazing like."

## Chapter Eighteen

The snow had vanished but it was still cold for a stroll in the dead garden behind Elk Park. Kathryn rather felt as if it matched her mood, however, and merely burrowed deeper into her cloak, pacing a little more quickly to stir her blood and generate some warmth.

It might be weeks before they could leave. The ship Mr. Winston had booked passage on had not even arrived in port and it would need to be overhauled and restocked before it could leave again.

The delay frustrated her.

Boredom filled her days and, unfortunately, that left her far too much time to dwell on things that were distressing and could not be changed.

She had told herself that she had not really believed that Sebastian would come after her any of the time, but she had hoped that he would in spite of everything. She knew she had because it had dwindled a little more each day since they had left London and she had grown more and more depressed.

If only the timing had been better! She was certain that if she had not had to face staying at Elk Park for weeks, she would have been able to cope with her broken heart better. If they had set sail already, or if she knew they would be leaving in a matter of days, she would have had so much to do and think about there would not have been so much room for thoughts of Sebastian.

As it was, she spent her days torn between the fear that he would come before she could escape and the hope that he would.

She had hoped to avoid a confrontation.

She very much feared, though, that she was not going to be able to avoid a reckoning this time.

After a while, worn down with her thoughts and emotions and the cold, she returned to the house. Lynette met her in the hall, fussing about her red nose and cheeks and warning that she was going to catch her death if she persisted in strolling about outside as if it was a warm spring day.

Cook had prepared hot soup for luncheon and they retired afterward to the small salon because it was one of the smallest rooms and by far the easiest to warm. They had to bundle up for at that for, as Lynette had often complained, it was a drafty old house.

Mid-afternoon they heard the sounds Kathryn had been dreading and hoping for for nearly a week.

A carriage pulled up outside the front door.

Lynette and Kathryn exchanged wide eyed glances. After a moment, Kathryn threw off her lap robe and scurried to the window. Irritation filled her, for the coach had stopped almost directly in front of the door and she could not see anything beyond the horses drawing it.

Hearing a rap on the front door, she hurried back to her seat and dove beneath the lap robe again, grabbing up the needle work that she was rarely without and even more rarely touched.

A mixture of fear and delight filled her when she heard voices carrying down the hallway. In a few moments, she heard Sebastian's brisk stride. He seemed to fill the doorway when he entered.

Her heart executed a somersault and collapsed at his expression.

He glanced at Lynette. "You will excuse us."

Lynette gaped at him, turned to look at Kathryn, and scrambled to her feet, galvanized by the authority in his voice.

Kathryn's own fear vanished abruptly and anger surged through her. "I do not like to be rude, but ...."

"Then don't."

Kathryn blinked, so stunned that Lynette had charged out of the room and Sebastian had closed the door firmly behind her before she could think of anything else to say.

Having ousted her companion, Sebastian moved to the hearth as he pulled off his gloves and unbuttoned his overcoat. After looking around, he tossed his coat and gloves down on Lynette's chair and stood with his back to the fire, studying her.

Kathryn stared back at him in wide eyed apprehension, her anger having abandoned her almost as abruptly as it had arisen. She could tell nothing from his expression, but she felt certain his tension was from anger.

"Why did you leave?" he asked harshly.

Kathryn swallowed with an effort, realizing it would probably only make him more angry if she said it had been because she realized that it was fruitless to pursue him any longer and dangerous to him besides. "I felt that the situation had grown ... intolerable," she said finally.

He blanched. After a moment, he turned away from her, studying the fire. Picking up the poker, he stabbed at the coals on the hearth and then set the poker aside and knelt to put more logs on the fire. "It is freezing in here," he said absently. "I do not recall ever noticing that this place was so devilishly uncomfortable."

"You never came before in the winter," Kathryn said softly.

He glanced at her sharply, his dark brows knit in surprise as he cast his mind back, trying to recall.

She smiled faintly. "I remember, even if you do not."

Straightening, he paced to the window. "Yes, well I must suppose it was tedious for a child growing up in the countryside, a girl, at any rate. There would not have been much to do, I suppose."

She had adored him when she was child. That was why she remembered. It hurt to realize he did not seem to remember anything about her, which was silly, of course. He had charmed her because he was always charming, not because he had really noticed the lonely child she had been, starved for attention and reassurance. What mattered was that, in his own charmingly careless sort of way, he had given her what she needed. "It wasn't. I had a wonderful childhood ... after I came to live with Dermot," she added a little uncomfortably.

She saw a muscle working in his jaw as he stood staring out of the window. He glanced at her frowningly and she could see that he was struggling to choose his words carefully. "Did you leave specifically because of me?"

Kathryn sighed, but she could see no reason to deny it. "Yes."

Several emotions flickered across his features as he turned to look at her, all gone far too quickly for her to decipher them.

"You should not have. You should have known that I would do right by you ... regardless of my unconscionable behavior. I am a lot of things--most of them disreputable--but I still have some sense of honor."

Kathryn stared at him in blank surprise, trying to adjust her line of thought to his. She had been thinking about the duel that had nearly gotten him killed, all of the disruption she had caused in his life. "I do not understand."

He rubbed a hand over his face, flushing. "For god's sake, Kathryn! I might have been completely cast away, but I remember what I did."

"Oh," Kathryn said, feeling a lump form in her throat as it dawned on her finally just what had brought him to Elk Wood--not that it had brought him straight away. He must have been wrestling with his dilemma fiercely. She almost thought it would have made her feel better if he simply had not remembered. "You have come to offer marriage because we coupled? Is that why you came tearing up here? Because you now believe you are honor bound to make an honest woman out of me?"

"I am duty bound!" he said angrily. "It is not just what I think, or I believe. There is a code of conduct, of behavior that binds us all."

Struggling to control her deep hurt and anger, she lifted her chin at him. "I am deeply gratified by your offer, but I fear I must decline." On the grounds that she would not have him if he did not truly want her and she could see that he did not.

A look of shock crossed his features. His color fluctuated. "I dishonored you," he said a little stiffly. "If I hurt you ... repulsed you in any way, believe that I deeply regret it. I give you my word that I will never again give you cause to doubt that I will treat you as a lady."

Kathryn sniffed. "Actually, to be perfectly accurate, I dishonored you. But I have to tell you I feel no obligation to make an honest man out of you. You were certainly not a virgin at the time."

He stared at her blankly for a moment before his face hardened with anger. "This is no time for flippancy," he growled. "I have made you an honorable offer ...."

"You did not!" Kathryn snapped. "You have done nothing but go on about your honor and duty and obligations! You did not ask me to marry you! You said I should have known that you would do right by me!"

He looked uncomfortable. "Kathryn, will you do me the honor ...."

"No!"

His eyes narrowed. "You are distraught!"

"I am perfectly calm!" Kathryn snarled at him, jumping to her feet abruptly and stalking toward the door.

Sebastian lost his temper. "If you did not want to marry me, why did you climb into my bed?" he roared just as she reached the door and snatched it open.

"Because," she yelled back at him, "I wanted to see for myself if you were a good lover!"

“Bloody hell!” he growled when she slammed the door on her way out. Striding across the room he snatched the door open and nearly fell over Amelia. He glanced up the stairs at Kathryn’s rapidly retreating form and then glared at his sister uncomfortably. “I suppose you heard that?” he muttered.

“I suspect the entire household heard that,” Amelia snapped. “Sebastian! How could you! A young, impressionable woman entrusted to your care and ....”

Sebastian reddened. “She is a spawn of the devil!” he growled. “You have no notion of the hell she has put me through and now she will not even listen to reason! She refused to marry me! She would not even allow me to get it out before she refused!” he said in baffled anger.

“I wonder why!”

His eyes narrowed. “I give you fare warning, Meally! I am no mood for any of your sarcasm.”

Amelia studied him in tight lipped silence for several moments and finally released a huff of irritation. “You have enjoyed the reputation of a charming rogue since you reached manhood--before that even,” she said almost mildly. “As difficult as it must be for you to accept, perhaps you have finally encountered a woman who is immune? Or, perhaps, you simply saw no reason to use that famous charm on Kathryn?”

“I was not trying to seduce my ward,” he said stiffly.

Amelia pursed her lips. “Perhaps you should try, then, instead of glaring at her and bellowing at her? I am sure I am no judge, but I do not think your courtship is going at all well.

“And if you have behaved recklessly with her reputation then you are certainly honor bound to wed her to right the wrong you have done. I will not take kindly to a half hearted attempt on your part calculated to make her refuse so that you can salve your conscience and move on!”

“It was not half hearted,” Sebastian said irritably, turning and stalking back to the fire to warm himself.

Amelia followed him, closing the door, more in hope of cutting off the draft than because she thought there was any point at all in worrying about the servants overhearing.

He was glaring at the floor when she flounced onto a chair, examined the abandoned lap robe and dragged it across her lap.

“No doubt you will find it amazingly droll, but I ....” He broke off, frowning. “She is not like any woman I have ever known in my life, Meally. I never seem to say the right thing.”

A flicker of sympathy moved over her expression but was firmly tamped. “It might help if you could drag your mind away from bedding her for a few moments,” she said dryly.

His face darkened with both anger and, Amelia suspected, guilt. She was not, unfortunately, intimately acquainted with that look of desire she had seen on his face so many times when he looked at Kathryn, for she did not think any man had ever looked at her quite like that, but it was the sort of thing one knew when they saw it.

“Take care, Meally!” he growled.



She glared at him, but finally sighed. "I am worn down from worry and from the break neck pace we set getting here. I am going up to rest for a bit. Calm reflection might help you, as well."

It was entirely possible that she was right, but he did not think it likely to happen--not in his case. Perhaps Kathryn's, though? He paced restlessly for a while after Amelia had left him and finally realized that he was exhausted, as well. It did not seem to him that he had had a decent night's sleep since she had come into his life, and he bloody well had not since the night he had taken her.

The worst of it was he still was not certain how she felt about it. For just a moment when he had walked through the door, he had thought he saw welcome in her eyes, gladness to see him, and hope had surged within him. But then it had vanished so abruptly he could not be sure, and he had found himself staring into wide, apprehensive eyes that seemed to damn him, that had made him feel guilty and angry and defensive.

Damn it all! He was the one who had been duped! She could not expect that he would not be angry at all that she had used such an underhanded trick to catch him! It was damned unreasonable to expect him to apologize for being ungracious about such a humiliating defeat!

Reaching the hearth again in his perambulations, he knelt and threw more wood on the fire, staring at the flames meditatively. She had not seemed to expect a declaration or a proposal, he realized. And she had made no bones about the fact that she did not welcome it!

He had been certain, for several moments anyway, that she was apprehensive because he had been a brute when he had taken her. He had been drunk and clumsy and thoroughly disgusted her with the whole act, if not him in particular--but mostly with him in particular he very much feared.

She had not seemed to feel that way when she had written that note, but perhaps she had only said that to spare his feelings? To keep from wounding his pride?

Straightening, he began pacing again.

If he understood how she felt about it, he would have some clue of what to say, but, as usual, she had left him totally in the dark and scrambling to figure out which way to jump, he thought irritably. He supposed it should not have come as any great surprise to him that she was so different, for she had not been reared by a mother. But he had thought such things were purely feminine in nature and they instinctively behaved that way, casting down clues about their feelings for a man to pick up on like dropping a trail of bread crumbs.

Katherine stared at him like a poker player holding a close hand. It was not that her face was perfectly blank, but it was sure as hell unreadable and she did not cast out clues in her mannerisms, or the things she said. She would only sit perfectly still and read him and respond to whatever he said or did until he was ready to shake her.

She had grown angry, though, when he had spouted all that nonsense about marrying her because he knew he should.

Well, it was not utter nonsense. It was the decent thing to do, regardless of who had seduced whom. He knew that. She had to know that.

He had handled it all wrong, he realized belatedly. Kathryn was not so different from other women that she would have been immune to an expression of affection--he didn't think so, anyway. He should have thought of that. He should have been practicing

some pretty speech that would have pacified her and not made him feel like a complete fool. He had been afraid that she would throw that in his face, though, after what he had done and the way she had looked at him in frozen terror when he had come in. Or worse, that she would scream at him hysterically and call him a beast and demand that he leave before she was violently ill.

Dropping into a chair finally, he decided that Amelia was right. He was going to have to swallow his spleen, and his doubts, and try to coax her to him. She was not going to fall into his hands like a ripe plum only because he had deigned to offer her what he had never offered any other woman.

And, perhaps, if he could get his mind off of his cock for a few moments, he could charm her into accepting him.

That was not going to be an easy task, though. It had been nigh impossible when he had only been imagining what it would feel like to be inside of her. He knew what it felt like now. He was not terribly clear on much about that night, but that he remembered with excruciating detail.

He did not know what the hell else to try. He could not drag her to the altar if she refused to go, as tempting as it was to consider it.

\* \* \* \*

Kathryn realized after a while that she was more hurt than angry. She did not welcome the realization. Anger was easier to deal with. She had a defense against that, a weak one, perhaps, but still some sense of righteousness.

She was well aware that she had not behaved as she ought at any time, neither before she had gone off to London, during her stay, nor since. Both Amelia and Sebastian had every reason to be angry with her for her duplicity.

She could not even claim that she had not set out to deceive them both for her own purposes, but she had been as honest as she was able to be otherwise. She had said that she did not particularly wish to be married and that she did not care whether she went about the ton or not.

She had certainly not intended harm or embarrassment to come to either of them.

She had a right to the pursuit of happiness so long as she did not interfere with the rights of others to that same pursuit, and she did not believe that she had, at least not in anyway that would be permanently harmful. She had upset their peaceful routine, but they could return to it now that she was not there to plague them.

She had thought that Sebastian would understand when she left that she was relieving him of any obligation for her actions. Of course her main reason for leaving had been fear that she would cause Sebastian harm, and her certainty that her ploy had failed altogether. But she had known exactly what she was doing, whereas he had been in no condition to make a decision for himself. She knew that. She was willing to take full responsibility for her actions and did not, in fact, regret it in the least. She had thoroughly enjoyed it. She thought that he had enjoyed it, as well. And he would have sought some woman to couple with if it had not been her.

She had been polite. She had thanked him for a wonderful time.

She should have known the swine would decide that she had done it to trick him into marriage, she thought angrily, the conceited cad! If it was not just like him to do so! And she knew very well that the only reason he had become angry and insistent was

because he was accustomed to having his way and it irked him to be told she did not want him.

He was not used to that, she was certain!

She might be pathetic, but she was not so sad a person that she was willing to accept him on those terms. She had only considered the possibility of marriage anyway because she had realized that he was not likely to take her as his lover otherwise.

She would certainly have joy of a life with him when he was always throwing it up to her that she had tricked him into marriage and he had not wanted it at all!

And he could not have wanted it when he had not so much as suggested it before.

Not that he had left her in any doubt of that!

Well, he would just have to grow accustomed to the idea. She was sure, once he had gotten over being angry about being thwarted of 'sacrificing himself for his honor' he would be vastly relieved.

The anger waned after a time, leaving her feeling empty and blue. She tried to thrust it off. Truly, she was no worse off than she had been before she had gone to London. At least she had something besides her fantasies now, some real memories to warm her besides those that were so worn and tattered with age now that she was no longer certain of how much was real memory and how much she had embroidered them. She could not love him more than she had or less now that she had come to know him as a woman.

And she had not expected that she would discover that she did not truly love him after all. She had not gone in hopes of dispelling myths or finding a cure.

She had hoped for more, but she was a realist. She had hoped, but she had not entertained any real expectation that she could make him love her in return. She could not hope to compare with the beautiful, sophisticated women he was accustomed to, and he had not fallen in love with any of them.

She should not have allowed her hurt to blossom into anger, she realized. It had confused him and made him angry in return. She would have to try to be more reasonable if she wanted him to be reasonable. If she could just remain calm and make him understand that she truly preferred not to be married, that she was completely comfortable shouldering the responsibility for her actions, then she could do what she should have done to begin with. She could set him free, make him comfortable again. She did not want to hurt him only because she was hurt. He could not help that he did not love her anymore than she could help loving him.

It happened, or it did not. She supposed she was greedy. She thought that it was possible that, if she accepted and married him, after a while he would grow accustomed and cease to resent her. Mayhap, someday he would even come to regard her with some affection.

And mayhap not.

She did not want to risk it. She would not be able to bear loving him and getting nothing more than respect as his wife in return. She would spend all of her time suffering over the certainty that sooner or later he would meet a woman he could love and then she would have to pretend that she did not know. As awful as the prospect was of loving without receiving, it would be hellish to know he loved some else, horrible to know that she had destroyed his chance of happiness by pursuing her own.

When she finally decided that she had her wayward emotions under control, she changed and washed her face, tidied her hair and went back downstairs, braced for another uncomfortable confrontation. Relief washed over her, though, when she discovered that Sebastian had decided to go riding.

Ignoring the surreptitious, speculative looks both Amelia and Lynette sent her, she settled with her mending and tried to focus on it.

She had been in the salon little more than an hour when she heard the sounds of a carriage pulling into the drive. Surprised, for they rarely got visitors and she was certainly not expecting anyone, she lifted her head and listened, certain she must have been mistaken.

The distant jingling of harness and crunch of wheels on the drive were unmistakable, however, and she set her mending aside and moved to peer out of the window.

The coach was a hired vehicle, without any sort of crest on the side to give her a clue as to whom their visitors were, but as she waited, she saw the door open and a man stepped from the conveyance. She was so stunned, she merely gaped for several moments in disbelief, but as she saw him turn back to the coach, joy filled her. Whirling from the window, she grinned at Amelia and Lynette. "It is Dermot!" she announced in an excited squeal and dashed from the room and down the hallway, throwing open the front door.

She had already raced down the front steps when she saw that he was helping a young woman alight. She braked, staring in confusion at the dark skinned, exotic creature.

But then Dermot turned to her as the woman alit with her bundle and grinned broadly. "Kat!" he exclaimed, holding out his arms as he strode toward her.

"Dermot!" Kathryn shrieked in absolute delight, rushing to him and throwing herself into his arms.

He laughed, staggered back a step at her enthusiastic embrace and then wrapped his arms tightly around her and spun her about as he had when she had been a little girl. When he set her on her feet at last, she caught his handsome face between her palms and kissed his face all over, laughing and crying at the same time. "I have missed you! You can not imagine how much!"

He laughed, fending her off after a moment. "It is freezing and you out here without so much as a shawl!" he chided her. "Let us go inside before we all catch our death!"

He turned to the woman who was waiting quietly near the steps of the coach, and Kathryn glanced up to discover that Sebastian had returned from his ride and was watching them. "Sebastian!" she exclaimed happily. "Dermot has come home! Now everything will be all right!"

## Chapter Nineteen

Kathryn was still virtually dancing with excitement as they made their way into the house and entered the salon. Trying to contain herself, she smiled at the solemn young woman who looked to be little older than her, if as old.

Her father smiled, pulling her forward. "This is my wife, Rose, and our son," he announced proudly.

Kathryn gaped at him blankly until that finally settled into her mind. "Oh Dermot! You are such a dreadful man! Why did you not write and tell me!" She turned to the woman then and embraced her a little awkwardly. "I am Kathryn, Dermot's daughter, and I am so very pleased to meet you!"

The girl smiled back at her tentatively.

Kathryn clasped her hands together. "Can I see the baby?"

Smiling, Rose handed him to Kathryn and she cuddled him close and pushed the blanket back from his face, chuckling at the wide eyed look he gave her. Realizing that everyone was still standing about, she grabbed Rose and led her to a seat on the sofa, sitting down beside her and cooing to the baby.

Seeing that he looked frightened and was in imminent danger of letting out a squall of fear, she hastily handed him back to his mother. "I am not at all certain he likes me," she said in dismay.

"It is only that he does not know you," Rose said kindly. "He is very friendly, but he is not accustomed to pale faces."

"What is his name?" Kathryn said, stroking his soft cheek.

Her father cleared his throat. "Ross."

Kathryn glanced at him sharply, feeling her throat close. "That is ... that is a very nice name for a handsome young man!" she managed to say in a fairly even voice, wondering if Rose knew he had named his child for her mother, Roslyn. She knew he had. She could see it in his eyes.

A flicker of pity went through her for poor Rose, but she knew her father was trying to banish the demons of his past, that he had a good deal of affection for her, or he would not have been willing to marry the girl.

Collecting herself, she finally dragged her attention from Rose and the infant and glanced around as her father held out a hand to Sebastian and then embraced him, pounding on his back. He was grinning when he stepped back.

Sebastian's expression was a mixture of conflicting emotions.

"What are you doing here, old friend?" Dermot asked pleasantly. "Not that I am not delighted to have you ...."

Sebastian's expression hardened. "I came to collect my ward."

Kathryn's belly knotted as her father's brows shot upward in surprise. "You have a ward?" he echoed.

Sebastian turned and fixed her with an indecipherable look and her father, after a stunned moment, turned to look at her, as well.

For several moments, Dermot merely stared at her. She could see the very moment it finally sank in. His frozen smile slowly collapsed and his brows drew together over the bridge of his nose.

He glanced around at the crowded room. "If you ladies will excuse us, Sebastian and I have business to discuss."

Kathryn watched them stride toward the door in wide eyed dismay.

Dermot paused in the doorway. "Kathryn, I believe you should join us."

Smiling weakly, Kathryn pushed herself to her feet and followed Sebastian and Dermot to her father's study, perching on the chair before his desk, mostly because her knees felt too weak to hold her up for she did not at all care to have both men towering over her.

Gesturing toward the chair beside Kathryn, Dermot moved around behind his desk and searched his cellaret for glasses. Pulling out a decanter of bourbon, he poured a drink for himself and one for Sebastian.

Sebastian, who had ignored the offer of the chair, stepped forward and took the glass.

"What is he talking about, Kathryn?" Dermot asked when he had settled in his chair and leaned back, propping his booted feet on the edge of his desk.

Kathryn cleared her throat. "You know the papers you left, just in case you did not come back as you expected?"

Dermot frowned. "I knew it was a mistake to believe that you would do as you were told. You did not go to your aunt, I collect?"

Kathryn found it impossible to look contrite. Sneaking a peek at Sebastian, she saw that his face looked like a thunder cloud. "She came here. And I must say I had the devil of a time ousting the old ... the woman!"

Dermot's lips thinned. "I know you do not like the woman ...."

"I can not abide the woman!" Kathryn said angrily. "I despise all of them! They were her family. They should have stood by her instead of ... instead of ...." She stopped, unable to go on for the wobble in her chin.

Dermot divided a speculative glance between his daughter and Sebastian. "Then you should simply have remained here to await my return, not altered the document. Which I collect you did."

Kathryn reddened, but dragged in a shaky breath after a moment. "I know that what I did was wrong, but it is of no account now that you are back."

"Except that you owe Sebastian and his sister an apology for imposing upon them," Dermot said grimly.

Kathryn threw Sebastian a tremulous smile. "I am very sorry, Sebastian."

Sebastian gave her a look.

"I should go and apologize to Amelia, too," Kathryn said hastily, getting to her feet.

"Not just yet," Sebastian said grimly. "The worst of it is that while I was minding your daughter, I seduced her."

Dermot's feet came off the desk abruptly. "Bloody hell, Sebastian! Can you not keep your ... hands to yourself at all?"

“That is the most outrageous whopper!” Kathryn gasped. “Do not dare be angry with him, Dermot, for he did no such thing! He just does not want to tell you that I seduced him!”

Dermot rounded on her. “That, I can believe! Kathryn Marie! What were you thinking, girl!”

Kathryn shrugged, studied her hands and finally looked up at Dermot again, swallowing against a hard knot that had formed in her throat. “That I did not want to live a life of regret as you have! That I would rather follow my heart and take what came than to always wish that I had!”

Dermot’s face hardened. Pushing himself to his feet, he came around the desk, dragged Kathryn to her feet and pulled her into his arms. Catching sight of the look of baffled anger on Sebastian’s face, he jerked his head toward the door and led Kathryn to the small couch nearer the hearth. Settling, he drew her down beside him. Kathryn hugged his arm to her and leaned her cheek against his shoulder. “I collect, since he has followed you that he has come to do the right thing by you?”

Kathryn let out a huff of irritation. “Yes, and I have told him to take himself off.”

Dermot’s lips twitched as he glanced back at Sebastian, who had ignored his silent suggestion to leave. Sending his friend a look that said ‘you may not like what you hear’, he returned his attention to Kathryn. “I know why you did it, Kat. You have fancied yourself madly in love with him most of your life. Is that it? You discovered that it was nothing more than an infatuation?”

Kathryn looked up at her father. “Was your love for my mother nothing more than that?”

He looked pained and then angry. “You are angry with me about Rose?”

She lifted a hand to his cheek. “I could not be more happy for you, and I am sorry to bring you pain by bringing it up, but I wanted you to understand that I feel the same way about Sebastian. I had feared that it would be just the same, but it gives me hope that you have finally found someone else to love.”

Dermot looked uncomfortable. He cleared his throat, tried to smile, and finally closed his eyes, sighing deeply. “It is not the same,” he said huskily. “But I have realized that all the wishing in the world can not change the past.”

Kathryn swallowed thickly. “She is very sweet, and so pretty.”

“She is,” Dermot agreed. “And she loves me.”

Kathryn met his gaze. “You know why I can not marry him?”

He studied her unhappily and finally leaned down and kissed her forehead. “It is just as well I came back for you when I did. Go. I will take care of this.” He grinned at her when she stood up. “You will like the colonies! They are as wild and brash as you and I!”

Kathryn chuckled huskily with relief. “I am already packed. And Mr. Winston has booked passage for me and Lynette on the next ship.”

She studied Sebastian hesitantly and finally went to him, slipping her arms around his waist and hugging him tightly. “I wish you every happiness, Sebastian,” she said a little shakily when she pulled away from him. “With all my heart!”

When she had gone, Dermot rose and sauntered back to his drink. Dragging in a deep sigh, he downed the amber liquid in his glass. There was anger in his eyes when he

met Sebastian's gaze, despite the smile that curled his lips. "You may breathe a sigh of relief. She has given you her blessing."

Sebastian stared at him in disbelief. "You do not mean to say .... Bloody hell, Dermot! I thought you meant to talk some sense into her! You must see that we will have to wed?"

Dermot frowned at his empty glass and then shrugged. "She does not want you after all."

Sebastian glared at him. "She said she loved me."

"Which is why I have decided not to blow a hole you!" Dermot said pleasantly.

"You could try," Sebastian said grimly.

"Unhappily not. Either way, it would distress my daughter, and I make it a point not to distress her if I can help it." He got up and refilled his glass, then held the decanter up in offering. Shrugging when Sebastian declined, he shoved the stopper into the bottle again and resumed his seat. Instead of drinking his bourbon, however, he sat staring at it musingly. "I fear it is a family curse," he said finally. "Unlucky in love."

Sebastian emerged from his state of disbelief into a state of fury. "I dishonored your daughter and that is all you can say? I offered an honorable alliance."

Dermot sent him a deadly, narrow-eyed glance. "Belated and unappreciated," he said coldly. "It is not nearly enough, my friend! You have not said one thing to make me believe you deserve my daughter!"

"You would condemn your daughter to a life of disgrace?" Sebastian growled.

Dermot gritted his teeth. "'Tis far better than condemning her to a loveless marriage to a man she has given her whole heart to. I would not wish that on a dog. I will certainly not sanction it for Roslyn's daughter!"

Sebastian's face went stony. "Very well, then, I will take myself off."

"Have a safe journey back to the city," Dermot said coolly as Sebastian stalked out, bellowing for the servants to bring his coach around and load it.

Kathryn had retreated to her room with the laudable intention of crying her eyes out, but she discovered the pain was too deep. She hurt so badly she could scarcely breathe and yet she could not release it. She lay on her bed dry eyed, staring at the ceiling as she listened to the sounds of servants scurrying back and forth to reload the coach that had brought Sebastian and Amelia.

She told herself that she could not bear to watch him go, but when the sounds had died away, she got up and moved to her window to look down at the carriage drive as Amelia and Sebastian left the house. When he had helped Amelia in, Sebastian turned to look back at the house. Almost as if he sensed her watching him, he lifted his head. For a handful of heartbeats it almost seemed as if their gazes met, and then he turned and climbed into the coach.

The knock on her door startled Kathryn. Discovering that tears were streaming down her cheeks, she mopped them off with her hands. "Come," she called, expecting Lynette.

Instead it was Dermot that opened the door. He stood on the threshold, looking ill at ease. Biting her lower lip, Kathryn closed the distance between them, hugging him tightly. He looped his arms lightly around her. "Are you going to be all right?"

Kathryn sniffed, suppressing the urge to weep like a spoiled, thwarted child. "Yes, papa. I will be all right."



He pulled away from her to study her face. A faint smile played around his lips. "You've never called me that."

Kathryn smiled back at him wryly. "Force of habit. Amelia insisted."

"I should get used to it, I expect. Ross will be running around before we know it."

Kathryn smiled more easily. "I just realized I have a little brother."

He stepped outside her room, drawing her with him. "Just now?" he asked teasingly. "You were cooing at him and making faces for nearly thirty minutes after we got here."

Kathryn laced her arm through his. "Because he is a baby and he is adorable. It had not sunk in before that he was my little brother. Tell me--where did you meet Rose? She is Indian? She speaks English so well!"

"Cherokee," he responded, nodding.

\* \* \* \*

The silence within the coach was anything but agreeable. Amelia was content for a while to keep her own council, but she was seething and finally, despite the fury in Sebastian's eyes, she uttered a much provoked sigh.

Sebastian slid a deadly glance at her.

Amelia pursed her lips. "I can not understand why Lord Marshall refused your suit," she said finally.

"Because his daughter refused it," Sebastian muttered almost mildly.

Amelia digested that in silence. "Did he know ...?"

"Yes."

"They are both mad!"

Dropping his elbow to the armrest, Sebastian cupped one hand over his mouth and chin, idly rubbing the bristles along his jaw with his fingers. Amelia gritted her teeth after a few moments. "You might at least have taken the few measly hours rest you allowed us and summoned the barber," she said testily.

"She said she loved me," Sebastian murmured as if he had not heard her.

Amelia blinked in confusion. "Kathryn told you she loved you?" she demanded in dawning outrage, wondering why, if she had professed her affection for Sebastian, they were on their way ... where ever the devil they were headed now. She strongly suspected, though, that it was Sebastian's fault.

"She did not tell me. She told Dermot that that was why she had done it."

"Done what?" Amelia demanded, all at sea.

"Forged the papers of guardianship."

Amelia felt her jaw go slack. "She forged them? Kathryn?"

A faint smile curled his lips. "Yes, our angelic little Kathryn."

"But ... but ... why would she do such a thing?"

"I am not certain. Because she would not go to her mother's only living sister. Or because she wanted to come to me. Both, probably."

He slid a glance at Amelia. "You are a woman."

Amelia glared at him. "If you are going to be nasty, Sebastian, I warn you, I will not be responsible!"

His lips twisted wryly. "I am giving you an opportunity to advise me, big sister."

Amelia sniffed, studied him suspiciously and finally sent him a curious look. “What sort of advise?”

“Why would a woman say she loved a man and then refuse his suit?”

Amelia frowned, thinking it over. She could make no sense of it as a generalization, though, and turned her mind to trying to figure out why Kathryn would behave so contrarily. “She is with child!” she announced triumphantly. “For women always behave peculiarly at such times, I am told!”

Sebastian turned white as a sheet. After gaping at her in horror for several moments, however, the look of terror vanished and irritation took its place. “Bloody hell, Meally! Do not say such things! You near gave me heart failure! Unless she has had an immaculate conception it could not possibly be that!”

“You are certain?” Amelia asked, mildly disappointed.

Sebastian gave her a look. “Absolutely.”

Amelia went back to pondering the problem. A thought occurred to her. She dismissed it, but it refused to be subdued. “Maybe it was the way that you proposed that set up her back?”

Sebastian flushed. “She did not allow me to get it out of my mouth!” he said indignantly.

“Well! I can not just guess! I have no notion what has transpired between the two of you beyond the fact that you had far too much to drink and became far too amorous!”

After glaring at her in fuming silence, Sebastian dropped his arm to the armrest again, cupping his hand over his mouth and began rubbing his finger thoughtfully back and forth across his whiskers.

Resisting the urge to box his ears, Amelia returned to pondering the problem once more. “You did assure her that you returned her affections?” Amelia said after a moment.

When Sebastian said nothing, she glanced at him curiously. Sebastian was staring out the window, his expression downright sulky.

“You do return her affections?” Amelia asked doubtfully.

Sebastian rubbed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. He swallowed thickly and stroked his hand down to cup it over the lower part of his face. “You will say I am justly served, but I do not think I have ever been more miserable in my life, Meally. Sometimes I am certain that I am mad about her. The rest of the time I think I am just plain mad. She manufactured the entire scheme from start to finish and I am bloody well furious that I stepped right into the trap she had set for me like a green kid with no notion of what was going on ... which I did not, for I was so entranced with her I could not see beyond that beautiful, angelic façade of hers.”

Amelia sat back. After a moment, she bit her lip, trying to keep from smiling.

Sebastian glanced at her and narrowed his eyes. “I knew you would find it amusing.”

Amelia shrugged. “She is not just clever, she is wise, for if you can not get beyond that there is no hope for happiness for either of you,” she said tartly. “She knew that before you did. That is why she left! And that is why she refused you!”

“Well, she bloody well was not being led around by her ....” He stopped abruptly. “She had her wits about her! Whereas I ....”

“Left your brain at the door when she came in!” Amelia broke in, finishing for him. “And you have not recovered it yet! And you never will, because you are in love with her and you are just too stubborn to concede defeat! And too poor a sport to acknowledge that you are fiercely glad she outwitted you! Because she handed you what you wanted all the time.

“A woman would know how to appreciate such devotion! If you had gone to such lengths to win her over as she had gone to for you, you would be at Elk Park now planning your nuptials instead of headed back to the life you had before, which you no longer want, and which will make you miserable, and which you richly deserve for being so stubborn that you have broken her heart! Regret is a very hard thing to live with.”

“I know I have made a bloody mess of things!” Sebastian growled. “How am I to fix it? She will not have me and Dermot wants nothing more than an excuse to put a hole in me!”

Amelia huffed in irritation. “You are grown stuffy! What would you have done in your salad days?”

“I am in my prime!” Sebastian growled indignantly. He was thoughtfully silent for several moments. “But in my wilder youth very likely I would have hauled her off and made love to her until she was too exhausted to fight me anymore!”

Amelia turned red as a beet. “Then that is what you should be doing instead of sitting here debating about what to do to change her mind!”

Sebastian frowned but abruptly sat forward and rapped on the panel. “Pull over!”

“Take a pistol!” Amelia called out to him as he leapt from the coach onto the road before it had even come to a complete stop. “But do not shoot Dermot! She will not thank you for that! Oh! And give her my love!”

She was not at all certain he heard the last instructions, for he had already untied his horse from the coach, mounted it and kicked it into a gallop heading back toward Elk Park, but she was feeling lightheaded with nerves when she settled in her seat again.

“Find a decent inn,” she instructed the coachman. “I am far too ill with nerves to go any further, and I very much fear I may have to return to Elk Park to collect my brother’s body on the morrow!”

## Chapter Twenty

There was a coach parked in front of the carriage house when Sebastian arrived. After studying it uneasily for several moments, he tied his horse and made his way across the darkened yard to check it out. The horses hitched to it whinnied as he neared them and he froze, listening intently to see if the horses had noticed his approach or if whoever had ordered the coach had left the house. When he saw no sign of anyone, he moved parallel to the vehicle until he spotted the coachman near the stables, warming himself over a small fire.

It was full dark. Who would be going anywhere at this time of the night? And why?

It occurred to him forcibly that Dermot had said he had come back for Kathryn and meant to take her to the colonies. He would not be leaving now, though, Sebastian thought, feeling a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach as he realized that he had been so torn by uncertainty that he had very nearly missed her altogether.

Shaking the thought off, he moved back the way he had come until he was in the shadows and circled the house until he found a way up. It was harder than he'd expected and he stopped to catch his breath before he shoved the second floor window open, looked around to make certain it was not occupied and climbed in, thinking wryly of Amelia's comment.

Well, he damned well was in his prime, he thought irritably. He just hadn't climbed a bloody house in a while.

And he did not know how he was going to climb down with Kathryn. "The hell with it," he muttered. He could take the back stairs.

He had already started across the room before it dawned on him that, as familiar as he was with the house from the many times he had stayed, he was not certain which room was Kathryn's. Casting his mind back, he conjured the image of Kathryn standing in the upstairs window earlier and did a mental count of how far down it was from his current location.

Not that it mattered as long as he stayed clear of Dermot's room, and he knew which one that was--unless he had decided to change rooms.

He discovered he had worried about it unnecessarily. As he eased the door open, he heard another door open a little further down the corridor. Lynette came into view, marched briskly past the room where he was hidden and went into another room a few doors down. Pulling the door wide, he checked the corridor and strode purposefully down the hall to the room Lynette had just emerged from.

The knob turned easily in his hand. Pushing it open, he stepped inside and looked around. She was standing in front of the window, gazing out at the night. Doubts abruptly assailed him and he froze for several moments, wondering if he had been completely wrong and she did not love him.

He could not afford, now, to entertain doubts.

Striding quickly across the room, he caught her from behind, covering her mouth with one hand, catching her just beneath her breasts with his other arm. She jerked in shock, struggling briefly before she discovered that his hold could not be broken. "I would hate like hell to have to shoot Dermot," he said coolly. "Not a sound!"

She stiffened, turning to stare at him in disbelief when he released her. "Wha...?"

He cut her off by placing a hand over her mouth again. Rolling his eyes, he looked around for something to bind her with and finally strode to her armoire, snatched a drawer open and began to drag the unmentionables out.

Kathryn followed him. "What are you doing?" she hissed in a barely audible whisper.

Ripping a pair of pantalets in half, he twisted one side into a narrow band and shoved it into her mouth, tying it. Too stunned at first to react, she reached up abruptly to remove the gag. Catching her hand, he dragged it behind her back. She whirled to face him.

Gritting his teeth and striving for patience, he caught both wrists that time, pushed them behind her back and held her against his chest while he bound her wrists together. She glared at him over the gag when he stepped back. "Wa ..thu..doin?"

"Guess," he said tersely, crouching down and tying her ankles together.

She wavered, began to topple. Bending, he caught her on his shoulder and straightened, heading toward the door again. He had just reached the head of the back stairway when he heard someone coming up. Cursing under his breath he whirled, looked wildly around, and finally ducked into the first room he came to.

Kathryn started wiggling and muttering around the gag.

He popped her on the buttocks. "Be quiet, damn it! Are you trying to get me shot?"

She made an indignant sound, but she stopped wiggling.

He did not even make it out the door the second time he heard a servant on the stairs. Returning to the room again, he waited. "What is it with the bloody servants around here? It's like Piccadilly Square!" he muttered, crossing the room and peering out the windows.

No way in hell was he going to climb down with her slung over his shoulder!

After thinking it over for several moments, he pulled the pistol from his waistband and headed for the door again. "The hell with it!"

Instead of trying the backstairs again, he turned along the corridor and headed toward the main staircase. After peering down it cautiously and assuring himself no one was in the front of the damned house, at least, he started down the stairs. Halfway down he stepped on a tread that let out an ungodly squawk.

The door to Dermot's study opened.

Sebastian and Dermot exchanged narrow eyed glares. Finally, Dermot's gaze dropped to the pistol Sebastian had leveled at him. "Get out of my way, Dermot," Sebastian said evenly.

"As soon as you tell me what the hell you're doing with my daughter slung over your shoulder like a sack of grain."

"I am collecting my wife," Sebastian said coldly.

Dermot's brows rose. "I've not seen a ring on her finger."

"There will be one," Sebastian said grimly.

“Gretna Green?”

Sebastian relaxed fractionally. “We could be there by first light.”

Dermot folded his arms and leaned back against the door frame. “The coach has been waiting a bloody hour. What took you so long?”

“You were expecting me,” Sebastian deduced, feeling a bizarre sense of unreality wash over him.

“Today was the first time I ever saw you completely flabbergasted. Even if I had not, I know desperation when I see it in a man’s eyes.” Shaking his head with a mixture of disbelief and amusement, he pushed away from the doorframe. “It’s been a while since I saw a man who has it as bad as you do. I knew you would be back. I had Lynette pack her bag.”

Irritation surfaced. “While you were at it you might have provided a bloody ladder! I had the devil of time climbing up!”

Dermot’s lips quirked with a tremor of a smile. “I was of no mind to make it that easy for you.”

Feeling uneasily as if he was stepping into yet another trap, Sebastian finally shoved the pistol into his waistband again, shifted Kathryn on his shoulder, and headed for the front door. Dermot patted Kathryn’s cheek as he passed with her. “Be a good girl!”

“Demt lu swine!” Kathryn yelled at him around the gag.

Laughter was dancing in his eyes when she arched her back to look at him. “Is that any way to talk to your loving papa?”

Sebastian set her on her feet when they reached the drive, holding her against his chest to steady her. Signaling the coachman with a sharp whistle, he scooped her into his arms when the coach pulled up in front of them and leaned inside when the door was opened, setting her on the forward seat before he climbed into the coach himself.

When the coach was underway, he removed the pistol from his waistband and tucked it beneath the seat, then lit the small lamp attached to one side of the coach wall.

Settling back, he studied Kathryn through narrowed eyes. “You’ve led me a merry chase,” he murmured.

Kathryn glared at him over the gag. “Untie e lu swine!”

Ignoring the demand, he surveyed her slowly from head to toe, taking in her tumbled hair, her flushed cheeks and glittering eyes, and her chest, heaving with indignation. And the way her breasts were jutting forward from her hands being bound behind her back, and the sheerness of her night gown that just hinted at the color of the skin beneath and clung to her curves.

Desire flooded through him fiercely. Leaning down, he untied the binding around her ankles and then skimmed his hands up beneath the nightgown and settled them on her waist, pulling her up, dragging her across the space the separated them and onto his lap.

Unable to struggle with her hands still tied behind her back, off balance with no way to catch herself, she fell against him, hooking her chin on his shoulder. Grasping her legs, he dragged her onto the seat on her knees, one on either side of his hips, and then settled her on his thighs.

She looked down at herself in confusion when she leaned away from him.

“Now,” he murmured. “You were telling me you subscribed to the belief that one should never purchase a stallion without putting him through his paces first.”

Kathryn's eyes widened as he slid down on the seat, lifting his legs and bracing his feet on the opposite seat. Steadying her, he slowly unfastened the placket in the front of his breeches and then his shorts while she watched in frozen fascination.

He paused. Instead of freeing the turgid flesh she could see straining against the layers of cloth that still partially hid his manhood from her view, he reached up and began to unbutton the row of buttons on the front of her nightgown, opening it to the waist. Her breasts, bouncing and swaying with the motion of the carriage, sprang free.

He caught her waist, dragging her closer. Slipping one arm around her to hold her steady, he skimmed his other hand over her belly until he had cupped it over her mound, searching the folds of fabric of her pantalets until he found the split crouch and delved beneath. Cinching the arm around her waist tighter, he plucked at the tip of first one breast and then the other while he parted her woman's flesh and explored her moist cleft with his fingers.

The teasing pluck of his lips made her nipples tighten and stand erect, jutting from her breasts in supplication.

Kathryn closed her eyes as a wave of exquisite sensation washed over her. Her heart leapt and began to pound furiously as his stroking finger found the bud at the juncture of her cleft and caressed it, sending jolts of sharp pleasure through her. She uttered a sound of surrender against the gag as his mouth at last covered the tip of one breast, pulling, sucking at it and heated sensation poured through her from that point of contact, joining the growing tension in her belly.

Heat engulfed her. Lethargy invaded her with a conflict of weakness and tension as her body shifted its focus internally. Dizzy with the sensations pelting her, Kathryn struggled against the lure of pleasure he offered, tried to brace herself against the bounce and sway of the carriage and keep her balance.

Dark intoxication filled her mind when he ceased to tease the bud at last and stroked lower, pushing a finger slowly inside of her to stroke her passage as he switched his attention from one breast to the other, sucking her other nipple into his mouth and drawing on it. She moaned. Her thighs began to quake with weakness, with the effort to hold herself upright.

He withdrew his finger. She sensed more than felt his hands freeing his flesh from his clothing and then felt the tip of his shaft glide along her cleft until it found the mouth of her sex. He released her nipple, panting for breath as he pushed inside of her.

She held herself still, her mind focused on the probing, of the slow melding of their flesh. She uttered a sound of dismay as he paused and began to withdraw.

He looked up at her. Lifting his free hand, he dragged the gag from her mouth, caught the back of her neck in one hand and pulled her down to his waiting lips. Covering her mouth with his, he kissed her deeply as he curled his hips and thrust upward, seating himself inside of her, pushing deeper and then easing off, over and over until he had sheathed his flesh completely within hers, so deeply inside of her she was gasping.

She dragged in a shuddering, mournful breath when he broke the kiss, hardly aware of the sounds of distress and need. Her entire being seemed focused on their joined flesh, and the quakes of the muscles of her passage around his engorged member.

Gasping hoarsely, he held her tightly for many moments. Finally, uttering a long, drawn out groan of surrender, he shifted his hands to her hips, urging her to lift slightly

and then bear down again. Each movement dragged his flesh along her passage in a stroking caress that touched off waves of glorious sensation that made the tension inside of her coil more and more tightly.

The bounce and sway of the moving coach became an assistant rather than an impediment, echoing their movements until she was coming down on his thighs harder and harder, gasping, whimpering, moaning ecstatically, murmuring his name like a litany of prayer. She spread her thighs wider, needing to feel him deeper still, uttering a long, low moan as he stroked the deep ache until her body abruptly tensed all over and then began to shudder and quake as her body reached crisis and exploded in culmination.

He caught her tightly to him as her body clenched around his cock in spasms of release, held her motionless for a moment his face burrowed against the side of her neck and then uttered a choked groan as his own body exploded with release, jerking, shuddering as his body expelled his seed, bathing her womb in the heated liquid of his expended passion.

She slumped weakly against him as the quakes began to gentle, rippling outward through her body in warming waves.

They leaned together, gasping, basking in the aftershocks. Dimly, she became aware of his fingers fumbling at the tie that still bound her wrists. Her arms fell free at last, and she dragged them up with an effort, looping her arms around his neck.

Her mind drifted, floating in sated bliss.

He stirred after a time, nibbling at her neck lazily and then working his way up her neck and over her jaw. Spearing his fingers through the hair on the base of her skull, he tipped her head until her mouth met his. Plucking at her lips almost teasing at first, his lips gradually became more demanding. He sucked at her lips, coaxed her tongue into his mouth and sucked it.

A shiver went through her. Her belly tightened around his flaccid member, threatening to expel it from her body. Instead, his cock hardened once more, wedging itself firmly along her channel.

Surprise flickered through her. Her body burgeoned in response, however, the spent embers of passion taking flame at once.

When he ceased to suck her tongue and thrust his into her mouth to explore the tender flesh, she closed her mouth around his tongue and sucked as he had hers. A shudder went through him. Slowly, he began to rock his hips, lifting slightly on hers to produce the friction of flesh sliding against flesh that built a new tension within Kathryn, stirring the fever once more.

Tearing his lips from hers, he tightened his arm around her waist until she arched her back, lifting her breasts to him. He suckled greedily at her nipples, moving from one to the other in growing hunger until Kathryn was moving restlessly against him and then lifting his head to capture her mouth.

They began to strive together again to reach the promised pentacle. Kathryn stroked his hair, his shoulders, nuzzled her face against his. "Sebastian," she gasped breathlessly against his hair as she felt her body begin to convulse again in waves of rapture. He caught face between his palms, watching her as she found the ultimate ecstasy. The rapture reflected on her face sent him over the edge. Releasing a pent up breath, he dragged her close to his body, tightened his arms around her almost crushingly as the spasms gripped him.



She went limp this time as her body collapsed in the aftermath. Barely conscious, her head lolled on his shoulder.

His voice was still raw with expended passion when he finally caught his breath and spoke. "You will marry me, Kitten."

Kathryn frowned, struggling to assimilate what he had said. "You do not want to marry me, Sebastian," she whispered despairingly.

He stroked her back. "I have never wanted anything more in my life, beloved," he said harshly.

She stirred, lifting her head with an effort to look at him. "You love me?" she asked, stunned, disbelieving.

He swallowed with an effort, capturing her face between his palms. "So much it scares the pure hell out of me," he muttered, pulling her to him and nibbling at her lips tenderly. He tucked her head against his shoulder after a moment, smiling wryly as he looked down at her face, stroking a hand along her cheek. "Which is just as well, I suspect, since you have enough hell in you for both of us. I am not at all certain you have made a good bargain for yourself, my love, but you can not cut me loose now. I am half mad already. I will certainly go into a decline. And I know you do not want that on your conscience."

Kathryn smiled tentatively. "You love me."

He chuckled. "I have been trying to tell you that in my own completely incompetent way since the moment you bowled me over that first day in my front parlor."

Sighing blissfully, Kathryn tightened her arms and snuggled her face against his neck. "I have loved you forever," she murmured.

He swallowed thickly, stroking his hand over her hair. "And I will love you forever more."

She subsided, delighting in the feel of his big body pressed tightly against her own and inside of her still so that they were joined completely. "Where are we going?"

"Across the border so that I can shackle you to me for life and will not be having to chase you all over the countryside, or beat other men off of you," he murmured. He caught her chin, urging her to look at him. "So that I can make you Lady Huntington, beloved wife of Sebastian Stockbridge, who is a complete madman, but who promises to be a most excellent husband."

She rubbed the tip of her nose against his. "And then what?"

A slow grin curled his lips. "I have a fine stallion that I am particularly proud of that I want to sell you. I know you'll want to put him through his paces first, of course, but I think you'll find the ride ... interesting."

The End