

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



Scandalous
PROFESSION
ELAINE LOWE

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Scandalous Profession

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SCANDALOUS PROFESSION

Elaine Lowe

Dedication

For my muse Angela, who is very much like Charlotte would be today and who will find her Richard someday soon. And for Lawrence, my own personal hero and the best man I know.

Chapter One

1813. London, England

The excuse he gave to Nanny Greene was partially true. He did worry about the health of her and her bones with the weather in London being so chilly for March.

So it was that Richard Wilcox, Esquire, successful businessman, was seen bundling his three-year-old son Theodore in copious clothing and mittens that would no doubt disappear within twenty minutes and walking purposefully...well, as purposefully as possible while holding said three-year-old's hand, toward a local park. Theodore needed time and space to get out his youthful energies and Mr. Wilcox, well Mr. Wilcox needed time to contemplate another kind of energy altogether.

He was unsure whether or not she would be there. As Theodore ran off over the winter-dry grass to try chasing a bird or two, Richard tugged nervously on his kidskin gloves and restrained the urge to run his fingers through unfashionably short, unfashionably red, hair. His valet would be positively livid at him if he ruined another hairstyle, not to mention another set of gloves. And all over a woman. Whom he'd never even spoken to.

Just lusted after.

Theodore laughed and Richard smiled at that sound, grateful as always that Theodore seemed to find happiness in the simplest of things. If only Theo's mother had been the same. A hard knot of regret and recrimination came to settle in his stomach over the brief thought of his dead wife. Or presumed dead at least. She'd run off with her latest exciting lover on a ship to the West Indies and that ship had been sunk by the French some two years ago, all souls lost.

It was hard to think that another woman wouldn't act just the same, take his heart and stomp on it with the heel of her shoe. At least Theo was there to give him joy. But

the aching need for a woman didn't leave him. He was a man and there were times when Gwyneth had almost shown him what real passion could be like. When she'd wanted something, or had imbibed just a bit too much wine with dinner, she became a remarkable actress. Once he had realized that the occasional reactions that he'd stirred in her were the exception and not the rule, he'd resigned himself to an existence without the kind of fulfillment he craved. He refused to resort to infidelity like so many of his fellows, and a certain staid truce had been achieved in their relationship. Of course, it had all gone to hell once she'd fallen pregnant and decided she had no wish to be a mother, at least when he'd revealed that he actually expected her to participate in rearing the child, rather than leaving all of the dreary work to nannies and nursemaids. But, Gwyneth had shown him that he needed sex, no matter that the mores of the day tried to preach that such needs were unholy. He wanted a body to worship and the whores that other men of his wealth and class visited satisfied some needs, as he'd eventually found out, but still left him feeling empty. The so-called respectable women that he'd been wooed by at the occasional dinner party he'd been forced to attend had all left him cold, the avarice in their gazes all too obvious, any physical interest surely feigned. After a time he'd simply ignored his own needs as best he could. But he knew that at some point, he'd need release.

He'd first seen his mystery woman at this very park some two weeks prior, as the sun made a brief appearance in the cold British sky. At first, he was unsure if the woman in the light grey of half-mourning was a servant but the happy shine in her eyes as she laughed with the young boy she had arrived with seemed too personal. A cry of, "Mummy, up!" soon revealed that she was in fact the boy's mother. Theo and the boy, who Theo later said was named Andrew, had seemed to have thoroughly enjoyed themselves. Richard berated himself for being unable to call up the courage to be highly irregular and introduce himself to Andrew's mother upon first seeing her.

After the second time the two families had met, Richard found himself staring at the brunette, whose sunny round face was framed by soft wisps of brown hair and whose bright eyes were captivating. He swallowed at the thought of the lush curves

he'd glimpsed when a gust of wind pulled back her proper cloak and the pink blush on her cheeks when he'd been caught looking. For some reason, his mind had wandered to the titillating book locked in a drawer by his bedside, though why this prim young mother should make him think of the wanton widow of the latest outré novella, he had no idea.

Even so, he now found himself at this same park on the same day of the week, at the same time, hoping that she'd appear again. If nothing else, she would be bringing the son that seemed to be the perfect playmate for lonely Theo. And all unknowing, she'd also be bringing the eyes that bore through him, the lips he'd wanted to kiss and the body he'd wanted to ravage since the moment he'd laid eyes on her.

Richard quickened his long stride, rounding a corner of the tall hedge in pursuit of his sprinting child and there she was, running across another wide lawn, chasing her wayward son as he made off with her bonnet, her hair streaming behind her and her laughter filling Richard with need. He wanted to make her laugh. He wanted that hair spread upon his pillow. He wanted to make her scream.

* * * * *

Charlotte Mallory looked out her tiny window at the cold grey winter sky and questioned her sanity for the tenth time that morning. He would not be there again, even if he had been there for the last two weeks. No matter how many fevered dreams, no matter how many times she'd touched herself thinking of him. She couldn't just order him to arrive in Blaine Park at an appointed hour so she could lust after him.

It was cold, seemed likely to rain and she should not torture herself by arriving at the park only to have him not appear. But Andrew was dressed and fidgeting, raring for a good romp on the lawn after being cooped up in the miniscule flat they shared with Aunt Jane.

Jane Marshall looked up from her mending and gave Charlotte a look of mildly amused annoyance, something Aunt Jane had mastered long before Charlotte had

shared a household with her. The older woman was still possessed of a good, if sturdy, figure, green eyes that Charlotte shared, and a smile that ranged from sympathetic to sardonic, depending on the recipient. Charlotte had grown to love the woman who had so recently become her family, though sometimes she was still puzzled by Aunt Jane's tendency toward biting social commentary moderated by fierce loyalty to those she considered her friends and an anomalous passion for some of the more domestic feminine pastimes such as stitchery. Aunt Jane sent a fleeting look at the window, and then remained in her comfortable seat by their small fire. "Make up your mind, my dear niece. Go, or stay, but this infernal indecision is driving Andrew, not to mention me, quite mad."

So against her instincts of self-preservation, she donned her gloves, bonnet and warmest cloak and picked up the ball that was a treasured toy and they made their way to Andrew's favorite park.

Truly, it was hard to deny Andrew anything, not when his smile brought her such joy, his hugs warming a heart that had been cold for a lifetime. Lieutenant St. John Mallory, may God have mercy on his departed soul, had never given her anything but heartache and Andrew, and for Andrew she thanked him everyday.

Watching Andrew burst forth into a happy run once they'd arrived at their destination, she wished that she could give him the expansive grounds of her childhood home, the fresh clean Derbyshire air, the snowball fights and forts that a boy on the cusp of three would just begin to love on a winter's day. It was that, the lack of a legacy for Andrew, that made Charlotte regret that her father had disowned her long ago. She'd never known her mother, she had no siblings and her father was a distant presence in a life filled with a series of blasé nannies and governesses and books and the son of her father's steward, Sinjin Mallory.

When Sinjin snuck off to join the army, she'd been fourteen and heartbroken. Even though the older boy had barely acknowledged her existence except to tease her about her books, she'd worshipped him. When he returned on leave two years later, he looked

tall and dashing with short blond hair and distinctive red coat. Her brain had been full of romance and the naughty books she'd found hidden on the top shelf of her father's library. The stable master had happened upon them in a musty smelling stall not five minutes after she'd been deflowered and the blood and semen had run down her shaking thighs as she'd stood in front of her father's imposing desk and listened to his tirade. It had been the most words she'd ever heard from him at one sitting.

Within a week she'd been in a coach with her moody husband heading for Brighton—sixteen, in love and full of promise and hope.

That had lasted three whole days, until Sinjin had finally returned to their bed, smelling of cheap whiskey. He'd taken his pleasure, leaving her none and then railed against her. She was supposed to have a dowry of thousands of pounds but her bloody father had only given him two hundred to take her. He'd needed that money damn it and all he'd gained was a stout homely girl who didn't know the first thing about pleasing a man.

Part of her had shattered hearing that and part of her had awoken. She'd tried everything, done anything. She'd sucked his cock. Learned to cook and run the house on the pittance he'd not spent on gambling. Ridden him like she'd never learned to ride a horse. Nursed his hangovers. Learned the right herbs to drink when he'd said he didn't want any brats running around. Still he treated her like nothing. He called her a whore and she'd endured. He'd never given her pleasure a thought, unless he was in an odd mood, where torturing her on her search for completion gave him a laugh.

When he'd come in drunk, smelling of smoke, she'd cared for him. But when he'd started to come in smelling like sex and cheap perfume, she'd stopped. She still read anything she could get her hands on, despite having to cook and keep house and learn to sew and mend her own clothes and his. Whores, real whores, were full of disease and she wanted none of it, no matter how much she craved touch. He'd beaten her a bit for it but he'd accepted it quickly enough and rarely spent a night home after that.

He hadn't touched her in a year when word came in that the Regiment was being sent to Portugal. Coming home for once to pack up his kit, he'd found her in her shift, sponge bathing and he'd fucked her up against the wall, whispering hateful words and laughing when he'd still managed to make her come. Then he'd left her crying on the floor. And pregnant.

She'd found Aunt Jane then. Her mother's disgraced sister, who'd been in some kind of scandal that the maids had gossiped about the one time Father had let the woman visit. When Charlotte had ripped to shreds every conceivable thing belonging to her God-forsaken husband, including leaving long gouges of fingernail marks in her own skin, she'd discovered Jane's letters jammed under a drawer in a dresser she'd overturned. Somehow, Sinjin had found just a wee bit of pleasure in keeping her from her only living relative besides her icy cold father.

Somebody had wanted to know her and Charlotte couldn't stay in that sad little house in Brighton. She'd gone to London and Jane was happy for the company and happy for the pregnancy too, when it became obvious. Jane Marshall had long known what kinds of bedfellows pain and heartache could be, and how one had to fill the days with as much decency and affection as one could hold on to, so that one could bear the nights. Aunt Jane had held Charlotte as she was so indelicately sick in the mornings, and made tea or found the scarce resources for a cup of chocolate when sleep would elude both of them. Jane's network of close acquaintances and bosom friends, both savory and unsavory, had quickly become some of the best people Charlotte had ever known. And not a moment too soon. Charlotte had gone into labor on the day she'd received two letters – one announcing the death of her father, the other, the death of her husband.

And so Andrew had come into her life, bringing her great joy, because her heart could hold no more sorrow. She'd taken the money from the government's death settlement and the pittance her father had left her in his will, since the bulk of the estate went to some male cousin she'd never met. All of it had gone into an account for

Andrew, so he would have something upon reaching his majority. The day-to-day expenses she earned with her imagination. And no matter how she loathed the leering ass who was her publisher, the lustful stories she wrote did well enough to keep them in bread and milk and firewood. And it allowed her dreams to run wild, dreams she'd thought broken and dead when she was sixteen. Yet at twenty-one she was wise and world-weary and her dreams had simply turned naughtier.

She shook off her maudlin thoughts and bent down to retrieve the ball Andrew had tossed in her direction when she felt her bonnet being torn unceremoniously from her head with accompanying giggles. Laughing as hairpins were lost irretrievably in the grass, she chased after her silly son, her hair flying behind her. She stopped dead when she caught sight of the tall man who'd stepped out from behind a high hedge. He wore a heavy greatcoat but it was open, and charcoal trousers encased what promised to be hard thighs. Her eyes took in the tall hat of a gentleman, the brilliant red hair, the strong chin. And the piercing blue eyes that seemed ready to consume her.

She didn't dare breathe. The stare was broken only when he bent, retrieving her abused bonnet from the grass where Andrew had dropped it upon spotting Theo. He rose slowly and she could feel his eyes on her body, her cloak sadly swept behind her, revealing her sorry mourning dress, one of her few gowns suitable for walking in the winter. But when he reached her face, she could only feel heat in his gaze, not the disgust she'd feared. Still silent, unwilling to break the spell, she opened her mouth slightly, moistening lips suddenly turned dry.

He swallowed and she felt warmth within her flare at this simple action. He held up her headgear and in a deep voice that traveled down her spine and flooded her core, he said, "I believe this is yours, Mrs..."

She blinked for a moment and realized he required a response. Forcing her voice to work she replied, "Mallory. Mrs. Charlotte Mallory." She took the proffered bonnet and placed it on her head, dreading the state of her hair, her flushed cheeks, her ancient dress. This time, she didn't notice how he stared at her hands and then at her full lips

that she bit while she tied the rust-colored ribbon firmly under her chin. "And your name, kind sir?"

He smiled, revealing a dimple in his left cheek and beautiful white teeth. She thought she would faint with longing, though she had never been the fainting kind. "Richard Wilcox, at your service, ma'am."

She tried to think of something else to say and moaned internally when the words fell from her lips, "Do you make a habit of rescuing ladies' bonnets perchance?"

But instead of running away from her crazed conversation he chuckled and she felt her knees go wobbly in response. "No, it is a very new pastime I assure you. But," his eyes swept over her and she felt her cheeks turn pink once again at his appraisal, "it has been most enjoyable so far." He paused for a moment and took in the sight of the two boys chasing after the ball. "You are Master Andrew's mother, yes?"

"Yes. And you are Master Theodore's father, I presume?" *Daft woman. What other man would be with the child,* she berated herself.

"Yes," he paused again and turned back to her. "They seem to be getting along. I am very glad for it. Theo doesn't have many other children to play with."

"No siblings?" *Or mother? Oh much too inquisitive!* She tried to reign in her curiosity.

He looked hard for a moment, a combination of regret and wistfulness and anger that she found eerily familiar. Then he sighed. "No, just Theo and myself, I'm afraid."

She hated herself for it but her heart surged in hot happiness with the news. She was deluding herself that this man would ever even consider... But oh how she wanted him. What was winter weather to bear when she was awash in visions of her thighs wrapped around this glorious man's waist, his cock so deep inside she would ache from it. Or of her hands tied tight to a bed frame with his silk cravat, as he buried his head between her thighs, showing her what she'd only read of, what it felt like to have a man's tongue stroking her. She was sure she must be bright red by now, between the look of those eyes and the randy thoughts swirling in her head. Overheated and short of breath, unable to think of a word to say, she silently prayed for help.

The heavens opened up and cold rain began to fall. An answer to her prayers.

Chapter Two

The butler made her nervous. She looked like a drowned rat and she knew it. She'd once lived in a house with a proper butler, a housekeeper, a cook and all of the formalities of unflappable aplomb that servants coddled. But she'd had five years of a completely different life, talking with elderly former governesses scraping by with whatever they had saved, making soup for butlers too old to open doors with the necessary hauteur, learning to sew from upstairs maids who had been dismissed when it was evident that they were in the family way. She handed her soaking cloak to a blinking footman, whose face held only curiosity, not judgment. He was too young. She knew the butler must have very strong opinions about the dripping, frumpy thing that sir had just shown in the front door of his fine house.

So she was surprised when the slightly balding man glanced at his smiling but damp master, the two laughing boys and then at her and gifted her with a ghost of a smile. A sense of promise filled her, along with dread that it would all disappear.

The wet leather bottoms of her half-boots squeaked on the marble entry way but the vigorous slapping of the boys' shoes thankfully covered it up. She found herself guided up a staircase, the echo of his touch on the small of her back as he ordered towels and warm milk and tea to be sent up to the nursery.

It had seemed like the only possible solution at the time. He'd offered his home as a refuge, it being much closer than her residence. It was a dilemma whether to be grateful or remorseful that she'd neglected to bring an umbrella. Still, she hadn't wanted Andrew to get sick and so the matter of propriety hadn't really entered her mind until they were almost at their destination. Or maybe she hadn't wanted to think of it, as she had so little respectability to lose. And Richard—Mr. Wilcox—he didn't look like a

crazed lunatic. Not while holding his giggling son as well as hers and running through a downpour.

When they arrived in the nursery, Theo's nanny had fussed over him and Mr. Wilcox had distributed towels. Charlotte worked to dry off Andrew but she watched the tall redhead as he dried off his face, wishing that she could have chased the stray raindrops along his jaw with her tongue. She turned back to her task, although the shot of heat through her was quite welcome to shrug off the cold clamminess from the rain. Mr. Wilcox excused himself to change and Charlotte made vigorous use of the towels on the skirt of her dress and set out her sad, soggy bonnet and shoes in front of the fireplace.

She warmed her feet as best she could, tried to make something of her hair and smiled at Nanny Greene as the two boys made a beeline for Theo's collection of wooden blocks and began an impromptu competition for who could build the tallest tower. When Theo's fell over, both boys simply laughed and Andrew knocked his over in order to match. Charlotte felt warm laughter bubbling up inside her to see her son so content.

A pleasant half an hour in conversation with Miss Greene about Theo and she'd learned quite a bit about the master of the house. How good he was. How often he played with his son. How generous he was.

Although it seemed to make him out to be the man of her dreams, she could not help the flicker of sadness that touched her with such reports. A man like that, that...good, would never want a woman like her, a widow and plain, with her occupation and...appetites. She tried to ignore the creeping tendrils of disappointment and simply enjoy her son at play in a spacious happy home.

When a light luncheon was delivered she was pleasantly surprised and caught completely unaware as Mr. Wilcox entered the room again, to eat with his son and guests. She forgot about her lack of shoes and wild hair until she felt the heat of his gaze on her again, his eyes lowering to her chest as she took a deep breath. Feeling suddenly

wicked and daring, she hopped from her chair and bustled to the hearth as the table was laid for lunch. Not doing a very good job of being discreet, she reveled in the sincere focus of the man on her exposed ankles as she did up her boots. Perhaps Miss Greene was shocked by it all but Charlotte's own blush was not from embarrassment but by the thoughts of how she wished to have nothing on but those little half-boots and have them digging into the back of Richard's hard thighs.

Still, she managed to make some semblance of conversation during luncheon and tried not to let the man's voice affect her too strongly. Perhaps her underthings were a bit damp and not from the rain but surely that was a private matter. If her nipples were taut, it would of course be attributed to the chill and not from the sound of his voice or the dimple in his cheek or his ill-concealed looks of blatant appraisal.

Andrew managed not to make too much of a mess and decided to use his fork for once, because Theo and the "big man" were using theirs. This caused Mr. Wilcox to release a knowing chortle and Charlotte felt herself very much at risk of falling in love, as well as lust, with such a beautiful man. Lunch ended all too soon and Theo and Andrew were up to dash around again but Mr. Wilcox stayed, chatting amiably with her about the perils of rearing young boys as the dishes were removed. She wasn't quite sure how she managed to engage in light banter when her skin had goose bumps from the slightest brush of his leg against her skirts but she did manage to extract more of those light chuckles and flashing blue eyes.

But, soon enough, he had to excuse himself yet again to attend to a matter of business and she realized she should really give thought to how she was going to get herself and Andrew home. A look out the window showed little sign of the rain abating. She worried her lip with her teeth, especially when she noticed Andrew give a characteristic yawn. Miss Greene simply stood and with a gentle but commanding tone, rounded the boys up into Theo's bedroom. Within five minutes Charlotte was in awe when she stood in the doorway and saw both boys were calmly asleep.

She whispered, “Miss Greene, that was the fastest I’ve ever seen Andrew go down for his nap! You are a miracle worker.”

The old nanny smiled, “Sometimes, a child will listen to another when they would ignore their own mother. Theo can be a little devil with me oftentimes but he doesn’t wish to disappoint his Papa. He’s never known his own mother.” Charlotte looked down at the little boy with strawberry blond hair, his head close to her own son’s tawny brown. The poor boy, she knew what it was like to have no mother. At least he had a loving father, just as Andrew had her.

Miss Greene closed the door to the bedroom and sat down in a rocker with her sewing. “You go down to the library, Mrs. Mallory. Find yourself a good book and by the time the boys are up again, perhaps the rain will have gone.”

A library! Oh, she hadn’t had the chance to wrap herself in the smell of books and leather for so very long. Books were so precious, it was hard to justify the expense. She smiled in gratitude and made her way out, down the stairs and with a soft inquiry to a passing footman, let herself in the large double doors to a surprisingly spacious room filled with book shelves and comfortable leather chairs. If she couldn’t have Richard—Mr. Wilcox—at least she might have his library for a time.

For someone who made her living writing books, tawdry books, but books nonetheless, she had surprisingly little contact with them. Books had been her boon companions in her childhood and she had put them away when she became an adult. She forced herself not to visit the local bookseller’s shop, given how apt she would have been to spend money on Chaucer rather than cheese. But in truth, she could never give up books so completely. If she wasn’t reading a story, then she was creating one to fill the void, to stem—or perhaps channel—the constant chatter in the back of her mind to fight the loneliness of her existence. Her stories weren’t the typical gothic drivel of proper feminine imaginings. Hers were lurid tales, her heroes and heroines filled with passion, abandoning the manners of the sitting room and instead letting loose a bit of the animal hunger within.

These tales had broken free from her mind and onto the page when the first full week had passed where Sinjin hadn't touched her, either in passion or anger. When the fear of being completely alone for the rest of her life had gripped her so hard she could barely breathe. From then on, she would use any scrap of paper, any parchment she could beg, borrow or steal. She covered them with a neat, careful script, pouring out pieces of her soul that she assumed no one would ever read.

She'd not taken into account that Aunt Jane was not, in truth, a proper lady. If Jane was going to raise her sister Martha's child – and damn it, the girl was still in need of a mother in the worst way, even if she was about to become a mother herself – then Jane would find out all she could about her. And so, Jane had dug through Charlotte's single trunk in a frighteningly thorough manner.

Charlotte had walked dejectedly through the door of the tiny flat they'd shared at the time in Cheapside. Weighed down by having failed again to find an employment agency willing to take on an applicant with no references, much less one who was pregnant, Charlotte could not quell the feeling of abject terror when she saw her aunt sitting on the floor between the tiny pot stove and her pallet, surrounded by familiar looking papers and completely absorbed in their contents. It took all her willpower not to run screaming into the London drizzle and throw herself into the Thames, but she managed to steel herself for the coming rejection, furiously thinking of plans of how to cope for the night, if not for the rest of her life.

When Jane finally returned to her surroundings enough to notice her niece had returned, she pulled a shocked Charlotte into a happy hug, and began to crow about how she knew a friend of a friend who was a publisher, and Charlotte simply *must*, yes *must*, talk to this man. And thus, a crazed route of self-expression became the thing that lifted her little family from the edge of poverty and allowed it to hover instead on the edge of respectability.

Books, to Charlotte, were a means of livelihood, a parent, a friend and a lover and nowhere would she feel more at home, more free and contented, than in a library such as this.

Humming a soft happy tune and browsing for a time, she spotted a rare copy of Moliere's *Les Femmes Savantes* on a high shelf. She located a stepladder and carefully balanced on her still damp shoes to reach for the play she'd long wanted the chance to read. So intent was she, she didn't notice the door to the library open and then shut again.

"Find something interesting?" she heard the deep voice so very close that she started and just as her balance gave out, she felt large and sure hands grip her hips. Steadier but blushing madly, she stepped down one step, his hands still gripping her hard, his breath skimming the back of her neck.

"I hope you don't mind me here," her voice shook, she couldn't help it. Thoughts raced around in her head, noting his smell, the strength of his grip and the flood threatening to erupt as her body helplessly responded to his nearness. Foolishness, absolutely foolishness. The most she could hope was to turn him into inspiration for a hero in one of her novels, though she wondered if it was within the scope of her talent to capture such a man on the page, or if it would simply be too painful a process given how much she wanted him and how much she wished he wanted her.

No man had ever truly desired her. She was nothing, no one. Wit and imagination were not the way to a man's heart, and her unfashionably generous curves and rosy complexion were in direct opposition to the porcelain perfection and lithe body that marked the feminine paragon. Time, heartache and childbirth had left their mark on her and she was hopelessly dim-witted to think that she had read anything of desire in those vivid blue eyes. She closed her own eyes, sure that she couldn't stand to turn and look at him without throwing herself at him. They were alone and he was so close.

Moments passed in their intimate position and both of them seemed equally unable to break away. Time slowed, and with remarkable precision she felt the whoosh of his

exhalation, the sudden tensing of his hands on her hips and the muscles in his arms, as though he had committed to a course of action and was steeling himself. He spun her around. "I'll take you anywhere." His lips claimed hers, without sweet seduction but with sudden flaring passion. Her thoughts stilled their race to personal condemnation. Her mouth opened and his tongue claimed every piece of hers, filling her body and mind with the lingering taste of wine and man. The forgotten book slipped from her hands and her arms wrapped around him, her hands diving into that rough blazing hair. He took her lower lip between his teeth and she whimpered, swaying on the last step of the ladder but for the large hands that held her. His teeth and lips moved down her jaw, her neck, until she felt his teeth through the fabric of her dress draw against her nipple, one hand releasing her hip to caress the opposite breast through a layer of worn linen. She moaned her approval, unable to fully comprehend how something so wonderful had come to pass.

But good things are too often cut short. There was a crash outside, no doubt a maid dropping something but it brought both of them back to some semblance of propriety. Her breath came hard and fast when he straightened and she saw those blue eyes were almost black with passion. His hands let go and she took a shaky step off the ladder as he backed away. His trousers could not entirely conceal the large evidence of his want.

She simply stared at him, skin flushed, eyes wide and dark. He looked fierce and feral and she wanted him to pounce. A mix of exultation and disappointment flooded her when he simply said in a husky voice, "The library is yours whenever you desire. Perhaps, next week, if there is rain again, you might consider bringing Andrew to see Theo again and we...you could...enjoy the library?"

She nodded, unable to speak. He stalked away, long legs carrying him quickly to the door. He stopped, looking back toward where she stood, eyes still hot, "My driver will be waiting for you, so you may return home in comfort."

"Thank you," she whispered, unsure if he heard her, the clop of his boots heard down the hall and up the stairs. She bent and picked up the book, then sat heavily in a

chair staring unseeing at the brilliant French dialogue, wondering only if Richard were upstairs, hand around his cock, stroking himself and thinking of her.

* * * * *

His fortune was not from land and farming but from trade. His father had worked to build a commercial empire and Richard worked everyday to keep it, grow it and pass it on to Theodore. It had cost him the approval of society, who thought that a man with a fortune should play at being one of the idle rich. It had cost him his wife, who wanted parties and glamour and to play at being dangerous. Real danger, real passion, she had little stomach for. She'd called him a beast more than once. She'd wanted an estate in the country, which he would have gladly purchased, if he thought she'd make use of it. Really, she'd wanted one because every man who called himself a "gentleman" had one and she'd wanted a "gentleman". Well she'd eventually found herself one, with manners and no money. So she'd stolen a great deal of Richard's money and made for Jamaica. And paid dearly for it.

So he was truly surprised to find himself, a man who'd never owned anything but townhouses and docks and ships, praying heartily for rain. If all the various cultures of the world could agree on an effective rain dance, he would have made a sorry fool of himself and learned the damned thing. He felt like a lovesick schoolboy, drooling and randy and all too ready to come.

He lay in his bed, the sun barely up and resigned himself to another round of abusing his cock. The skin was practically chapped. He hadn't been this desperate since before he'd gone up to Cambridge and his father had given him a whipping for being caught with his hands up the skirts of a very willing scullery maid.

He glanced at the book he had been perusing the night before on his search to stanch his raw lust over this woman. Written by his favorite author of erotic fiction, that book had always managed to satisfy – raw enough to stir his blood, but soft enough to know the words had been written by a woman. And the knowledge that such women

existed – bright and literate, witty and a touch wicked – that brought him a bemusing sense of hope as well as an endless source of arousal.

But now, Angel's works just didn't have the same impact once he had a flesh and blood object for his cravings. Fallen Angel was a mysterious author of some of the most whispered about works of sexual fantasy, and her female protagonists were incredibly sexy. But they were mere shadows compared to the desire he felt for Charlotte Mallory.

A week later and he could still taste Charlotte's skin, feel and smell the want pouring off of her. The sound of her laugh, the softness of her expression when she looked at her son and the lust he'd caught a glimpse of when she'd kissed him, giving him measure for measure in passion. She was everything he'd hoped.

And what the bloody hell was he supposed to do about it? Make her his mistress? He doubted she'd be amenable to such an arrangement. She might want his body but he wasn't sure if she'd take money, even if he wanted to buy her clothes and jewels, toys for her son and an estate with a lawn that she could run across chasing boys with stolen bonnets, just so he could see the roses in her cheeks. Then he'd heighten the color further by whisking her off to a secluded grove and fucking her up against a tree, his hands gripping the luscious curves of her ass, his face buried in those glorious breasts.

During their courtship, Gwyneth had toyed with him, offering everything and giving nothing until they'd been married. The proud daughter of a spendthrift country baronet, she'd played the game to perfection and snared him good and tight within a month of their introduction in Bath. But time had shown she had possessed no real passion, only a blurry mirror of his when occasion called for it. She'd been fine and delicate, flat and shapeless, with bony hips and sharp ribs. It was amazing what clothes could conceal, or give the appearance of.

Being caught in the soaking rain, observing Charlotte Mallory's provocative display of shapely ankles, trapping her in his library and tasting the forbidden delights of her cloth-covered breasts, all had shown him that every woman was not so contrived. Charlotte was all real. And he wanted her, every bit of her. If she insisted on marriage,

he wasn't entirely certain he wouldn't acquiesce, just to have another taste of her. God, he was going mad. He had to be careful, for Theo's sake if not his own. He couldn't marry willy-nilly for the sake of his sorry cock. Even if it looked like she was an amazing mother.

He had a sudden vision of her, heavily pregnant with his child, sitting astride him and taking her pleasure, her eyes alive with passion and his hands full to overflowing with those breasts that had haunted his dreams. He came hard then, her name on his lips.

The rain started at ten and he dispatched his coachman with barely restrained glee at the first drop. When the front door opened less than an hour later, he was impatient and cursing London traffic and he suppressed his irritation at the delay in order to give Charlotte and Andrew an attempt at a smile. It would do him no good to appear surly when what he felt in truth was a heady mixture of desire and determination. When she walked in that door, she would be his. He hoped that she understood that. Or if not, he would certainly enjoy teaching her.

Walking in the door and shaking off the rain, she gave him an honest smile that he couldn't help but return in full. She was pink-tinged skin and rounded lushness, a bright easy laugh and sparkling green eyes that had seen the world but were neither bored nor cowed by it. Most of all, she was passion incarnate. A certain zest for life seemed to well up from within her, brightening the staid rooms of his house as she moved through it toward the nursery and causing even the servants to step a bit more lively in response.

He tortured himself with light conversation, playing with both the boys and trying to will his frequent erections at the sight of her into submission. She was in blue today. She looked good enough to eat. Which he planned to. As soon as possible.

He learned that she did enjoy Moliere. In French no less. And Dante in Italian. The fact that her husband had died some three years ago in Portugal found its way into conversation. He felt a touch of guilt but even more relieved at this confirmation of her

marital status. It was also unmistakable in the chill of her tone that Mr. Mallory was not terribly missed. He'd told her of Gwyneth's death at sea and thanked heaven when she'd had the intelligence and tact not to ask for details.

It was evident that she hadn't very much money. Her clothes had been laundered many times. But her form was so enticing, her eyes vibrant and alive, a man would have to be blind and stupid to judge her solely by the worn but well-mended clothes. He was not unintelligent and definitely not sightless.

She was not destitute though. Her son wore new clothes and was hale and hearty, not lacking for food or warmth. But her hands were not calloused with labor but ink-stained. She was a puzzle that he planned to have a great deal of enjoyment solving.

But children had a way of interrupting the best laid plans and taxing the most patient of souls. Theo and Andrew were a whirlwind of motion, demolishing the neat order that the nursery had been in the morning. They didn't want to eat lunch but continued to play some game evident only to the mind of the young, involving one child covered in a stolen sheet and wandering around and the other giggling madly.

Then Andrew came up, a broad smile on his face and gave his knee a firm hug, for which Richard could not help but smile. Then he'd said, "Theo Papa?" in a clear strong voice, to which Richard had nodded, smiling. And that had been followed with the loaded question, "Andy Papa?"

Charlotte let out a gasp and bit her lip in obvious concern, an action which still sent a shot to his loins, even in this situation where he could see a shock of fear in her eyes. She'd answered for him, "No Andrew, this is Theo's Papa, Mr. Wilcox," leaving him simply to smile fondly at the boy.

"Wilcos. Hi, Mister Wilcos!" With that, Richard had received another hug and Andrew was off again chasing Theo, who was making an attempt at hiding, still in the sheet, behind the open-slatted rocking chair.

Richard couldn't help but let out a laugh and the relieved smile that graced Charlotte's face made him angry at the blasted husband, who must have treated her

poorly indeed to have her so worried over his response to the words of a child. It also made him very much want to find out what other things he'd have to teach her, about what would and would not cause him to react in anger. And how much he would enjoy teaching her and undoing whatever her worm-eaten husband had done to cause the sad guilty look he'd seen in her eyes whenever he'd caught her appraising his form.

Suddenly, he found he could not wait around for two rambunctious boys to become tired and fall asleep. He had to do something with himself or risk dragging the woman off into a linen closet and tearing off her clothes. Excusing himself to attend to a matter of business, he did his best to ignore the nervous look of longing in her face and left the nursery with all haste.

Locked in his office, he paced, long strides eating up the thick carpeting in too short a time, the ticking of the clock on the wall seeming to move more slowly than Jamaican molasses. He almost wished that it was not a peak hour for traffic, and he could get to Bond Street and Jackson's boxing parlor for a good round of sparring. He sat down at his chair, pulling forth the master ledger of accounts he insisted on keeping, staring unseeing at the columns of numbers. His blood was not in his head, after all. At least not in the head that could count higher than two. Two lips, two breasts, two buttocks.....

Argh! Damn and blast. His hand lashed out, knocking over an inkwell and the next few minutes were spent in some commotion, calling for towels and maids and trying to save the invoices and unfinished letters on the desktop. More minutes were spent reorganizing everything and finally, after another hour had passed, he gave in to the urge to walk, as slowly and calmly as he could manage, to the library.

When he opened the door, she was perched on the edge of one of the leather chairs. He breathed a sigh of relief and anticipation and closed and locked the door behind him. When he turned back to her, he noted she had not moved at all. She was simply sitting, lovely lips pursed in deep contemplation and staring at his latest acquisition.

In sudden retrospect, perhaps that purchase was ill-considered. No matter how much it had solved a problem or fed his imagination. The chaise longue was the solution to a problem. She had liked the library. He couldn't very well take her in to his bedchamber. Even his office was too masculine, too much his own territory, not to mention it presented the problem of comfort. The library was comfortably neutral. It could be made private and would not engender quite so much gossip, although he wasn't sure she gave any more of a damn about that than he did. But the library had needed a proper...surface. And he had obtained the fashionable long chair and had it covered in the best velvet from his considerable stockpiles. Rich brown, with hints of red. He had pictured her naked and writhing on it. Perhaps not in this interlude, there were things that needed to be discussed but – damn it – soon!

But possibly he had pushed too far too fast. She finally turned her head to him and stood, her face still serious. He approached her slowly, as one might approach a startled horse, somewhat fearful of being lashed out at. With a sudden tightening of her countenance, she ran the last few steps between them and threw herself at him, gripping his face in her hands and pulling him down to her. His lips encompassed hers, sweet and full, and he groaned with relief. Parting her lips with his tongue and tangling with hers, it took him a moment to notice the motions of her hands between them. Moving away from her lips and sprinkling kisses along her jaw, he glanced down to find her working at the tiny row of buttons along her bodice which had taunted him all through the late morning and luncheon.

He pulled away, gripping her hands and forcing them behind her back, causing her breasts to thrust forward even more, a wide grin on his face. She gave him a pretty pout and he kept her small hands imprisoned in one of his own and used the other to flick open each tiny faux pearl and then, finally, draw down the fabric and uncover those enticing mounds.

Dear God, she was beautiful. Full and ripe, everything he wanted, everything he had unknowingly missed from his frigid wife. Her blushes reached from cheeks to chest

and probably lower and he wanted to find out just exactly how far down they went. But first...he made to kneel, releasing her hands but she stepped backward, pulling him with her, his face following her elusive nipples like a hound follows a scent. When her legs hit the chaise, she dropped back onto its velvet softness and he followed, kneeling before her and finally running his tongue along the soft pale skin of the inside curve of her breast, drinking in her soft moans. She tasted almost of some kind of fruit, sweet, earthy and fresh. When his teeth captured her nipple, her hands dug into his hair almost hard enough to leave marks on his scalp. And he loved it.

Growling, he was merciless to her, plucking one nipple between his fingernails while sucking hard on the other, feeling her breathing stop and then start again, hard and fast, her hips circling up toward him. His patience had fled long ago and his hands found the edges of her skirt and dashed underneath, up along cotton underthings to the ties guarding her sex and then, within. She arched up against him as he slid a finger within her folds, the wetness making him throb with impatience. He wanted to pull open his trousers and fuck her, feeling all this moist heat tight around him in more than dreams, hear her scream his name as she came.

But bloody fucking *reason* still got in the way. His finger thrust into her and she was so damn tight. Too tight. She'd not had a man since she'd given birth, he'd wager his entire business on it. This wasn't something she did lightly and he didn't want to leave her with a bastard child. And today, he didn't trust himself not to come hard inside her with embarrassing rapidity, especially when she was this tight, this responsive.

He pulled back from tasting her breasts. Her eyes were glassy, her breasts flushed, her nipples dark and tight, red spots forming where he'd bitten the skin to hear her whimper. Her knees were wide apart and welcoming. He couldn't have her completely until he could control himself but he'd be damned if he would leave her unsatisfied. He pushed the skirts and petticoats up around her waist, ignoring her surprised squeak and widened the split in her pantaloons until the fabric tore. She was pink and glistening and his.

His tongue touched her and she keened in surprise. He knew then that no one had ever done this to her, had made her this wild. He also knew now the fruit he'd tasted earlier on her skin. She tasted like a pear. Full and ripe and sweet. He intended to savor every bite. He played with her clit, drawing little figure-eights with the tip of his tongue to torture her. Then one finger thrust inside and another, while yet another played with the edge of the pink pucker just beyond. He nibbled softly on the center of her pleasure and she screamed once before biting down on her knuckles. He chuckled with smug pleasure as he continued to lick as she clenched tight around his fingers and then collapsed, the tension draining out of her with languor.

He got up off the floor, his cock so hard he thought he might just keel over if he stood, so he sat on the edge of the couch by her knees, trying to exert the will not to ram into her as he watched her catch her breath, her eyes still closed, eyelashes fluttering. He sucked in air through his teeth and closed his own eyes, trying to think of the cold column of numbers in his ledger or the upcoming meeting with his solicitor or the repulsive form of the Prince Regent. Anything to ease the pain of not being inside the woman whose scent still filled his nostrils.

Though he'd felt her weight come off the seat, he couldn't stand to open his eyes, so it came as a shock when he felt he trousers jerked open and his smallclothes pushed aside as she knelt before him. And then those small ink-stained fingers that he'd studied all morning were stroking him and the look on her face of appreciation, near awe, fed his ego enormously. Then those swollen red lips encompassed him fully and he felt her tongue press against the back of his glans. His eyes rolled back into his head and his hands threaded through her hair, raining hairpins around them. He thrust against her and she took him in, all of him and seemed to relish every bit of it.

He came with a roar, holding her head against him and shuddering and she drank him in whole, with not a qualm. Her eyes laughed up at him, strong and wild and he wanted nothing more than to stay locked in this library with her for the next week, rather than spend it waiting for her to return.

Chapter Three

Jane Marshall knew that something was different about her niece Charlotte. She and Charlotte bustled about their small but well kept home on Haversham Street, trying to keep reign on an excited little boy while finding him clothing appropriate for the topsy-turvy weather of early spring and keeping him in some state of cleanliness. But, even this activity couldn't prevent Jane from noticing the subtle changes in Charlotte, and recognize them for what they were.

A remarkably resilient girl, Charlotte had brought a sense of purpose back to Jane's life after she'd been left adrift. It was surprising to Jane that she'd let herself love someone, two someones, if you include the charming young Andrew in the equation. Love had caused Jane immeasurable pain, but it had also brought meaning to her life. The Navy Captain who had won Jane's heart had been married, but Jane had not let that stop her from dashing into his arms.

His wife, who was also his cousin, had been more a friend to him than a wife and was far away in Jamaica. So, Jane's life in Portsmouth had been fulfilling in its own way. The ten years she'd spent as mistress to Captain Anthony Reynolds had brought her much joy. Independence was a heady sensation and a heavy weight, and she learned to manage very well when Anthony was at sea. She'd met a vast array of people and discovered that there was a hell of a lot more to life than the stultifying boredom her parents had imposed. Her only true regret was what her actions had done to her sister Martha. Married off to a cold, uncaring man of suitable wealth and position, Martha's letters grew increasingly despondent until she'd simply let the trauma of birthing her only child just carry her away.

Jane had always felt a queer sense of responsibility for that child. In fact she had made the trip more than once to try and see Charlotte, succeeding only the one time just

after Anthony had been killed in battle and Jane had found herself utterly alone. She had been saddened to see Charlotte growing up in circumstances even more glacial than she and Martha had known as children. Somehow, Charlotte had developed an indomitable will to survive where Martha could not, and Jane had done her utmost to keep in contact when the child had been summarily married off to that cad Mallory. Jane had had to flirt mercilessly with Mallory's father, the grasping little steward to Martha's husband, in order to win the right to see Charlotte the one time she'd been able to sneak in, so she was not surprised at all to see that the apple did not fall far from the tree and the steward's son was just so much scum.

When Charlotte had somehow, against all odds, ended up on her doorstep in Cheapside, Jane had tried to best to make a family for the girl. Jane had a bit of a legacy that Anthony had managed to give to her over the years but it was hardly enough to support two women and in time, a child.

London had been a refuge for Jane, far away from the sea and the sailors and the bittersweet memories of what love had been. Still, time and distance could not chase memory away completely and Jane knew what it had felt like to be in love, knew deep down as though it was as fresh as the first time she'd seen Anthony on the promenade in Lyme Regis. And if she was not very much mistaken, that remarkable feeling had taken seat in her lovely niece. No doubt, these mysterious jaunts in a fine carriage to visit "a friend of Andrew's" had something to do with the soft smiles, wistful sighs, and telltale blushes that seemed to often grace Charlotte's open face in the past two weeks. The girl, for all her brilliance, was far too easy to read. Jane only hoped that whoever he was, he was worthy of her girl. She deserved a diamond, not another piece of coal.

To Jane, it mattered not if he was a pauper or the Prince, only that he treated Charlotte with respect. And passion. Though the bulk of their livelihood came from that girl's impressive imagination, Jane did not think that it was healthy for Charlotte to feed her soul tidbits of fantasy when she needed a banquet of real, honest-to-goodness sensual experience. Anthony had left Jane with a small legacy, but more importantly,

he'd left her with the knowledge of what it was to be worshipped. Enough to fill her heart and keep her spirit alive, a rare thing for an old unmarried former-gentlewoman. Perhaps Jane was hiding a bit from the world and living in her memories, but she was six and forty, too old to enjoy the game of love anymore. Charlotte was young. She still needed to feel some of that magic, even for a fleeting moment, or she would eventually dry up and blow away in the storms that life threw her way.

Jane helped wrangle Andrew into his jacket and hat, and watched Charlotte attempt to repress her nervous smile and frequent hand wringing. The nervous mother and bouncing child made their way out the door and down the steps to the entryway, Charlotte giving her a final nervous glance, worrying her lip with her teeth. Jane raised her eyebrow, as if to say, "Whatever could be worrying you so, my dear girl? It's only a trip to let Andrew play with a friend." Jane wondered exactly who would be doing the playing, Charlotte or Andrew. Charlotte seemed to receive the unspoken message and shook herself slightly, straightening her back and walking with aplomb as she nodded sagely to the gossipy Mrs. Hearst, the ever-present landlady, on her way out the front door.

She closed the door of their comfortable little flat and went to the small window to watch the carriage roll gracefully down their street. Jane hoped that Charlotte, brave and bawdy and blushing Charlotte, had found a man that could help her find her rightful share of bliss.

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It wasn't raining, in fact, it was unseasonably warm but she and Andrew stepped into the carriage anyway. At least there was no fine crest on the side or anything so out of place in her neighborhood. But it was a good, solid, comfortable carriage and Andrew was very excited to see it again, knowing he was to visit with Theo and get to play with more toys. And see the "tall man". Andrew talked a lot about the tall man and Charlotte herself wished that she had a confidant with whom she could discuss that man as well.

As the well-sprung carriage rolled in comfort along the London streets, they passed Blaine Park, where the cold of winter was fought by the buds just starting on the trees. Charlotte kept one hand on Andrew to prevent him from pitching out the window in his enthusiasm and her mind set on interpreting the past actions of Mr. Richard Wilcox, Esquire.

He'd come in her mouth and then dragged her up from the floor, kissing her hard so that she had tasted herself on his lips and she knew he could taste himself on hers. It was the most erotic kiss she'd ever had, after the most amazingly intense sensual experience of her life. She was his to do with as he pleased and it terrified her. She'd been incredibly independent really, from the moment that she'd stepped off the carriage in Brighton to see the pathetic flat that she would force into becoming a home. She never really needed Sinjin. But she feared she was very much in danger of needing Richard.

He'd dragged himself away from her, setting her down on the chaise while he stood, arranging his clothing and dragging a hand through his hair, his pale skin flushed red with either embarrassment or passion, she was still unsure which. She'd smoothed her skirts and began to adjust her bodice and her hair, the silence gaping between them as he simply stood there watching. He'd simply said, "You'll come next week."

It may have been a statement, or a question. But here she was again in his carriage, all sense of propriety or coquettishness long ago cast off. Still, when they arrived and the butler informed her that Mr. Wilcox was engaged in business and regretted that he had been unable to greet them personally, the small knot of worry that rode in her stomach suddenly blossomed into a confused bouquet of emotion. Shame and desire, power and fear all warred within her for dominance. She resigned herself to watching the boys, chatting half-heartedly with Miss Greene and picking at the excellent luncheon. Perhaps he didn't want her but merely sent the carriage out of politeness? Obligation?

Was she some kind of a servant now? Did he expect to give her carte blanche and have her come at his beck and call? They had discussed nothing of their private encounters, only engaged in mad passion. She had no desire to be his mistress—something she could not conceal from her son as well as she could her current occupation. And such an occupation would be subject to his whims and his whims alone, and in her experience, men were fickle things.

But she did still want Richard, not just for his body— which she longed to see more of—or the way he made her feel. She was just as desirous of the pleasant conversation they'd shared in during luncheon, the way he cared for his son and his household, the light in his eyes.

Halfway through lunch, he'd made an appearance and did not complain a bit over the twin sets of messy handprints Theo and Andrew left on his trouser legs with their enthusiastic greeting. Charlotte gave him a half smile and she could tell by the burning in his eyes that he was not uninterested. She felt herself grow warm again and this time, she worried that her daring choice of clothing would make it all too easy to detect the state that he could bring her to with a single glance.

She wished she had time to calm down, to think and plan what they needed to discuss but the boys again put every plan aside. All the commotion of Richard's arrival in the nursery had tipped the balance from excited play to aggravated yawning. Before Charlotte could properly gather her thoughts, the boys had been sent off to bed. Miss Greene was ensconced once again in her rocking chair with her notions basket and Richard was holding out his arm, as though waiting to escort her to dinner.

They walked down the stairs in silence. Charlotte was unsure whether he'd given a warning to the servants not to be in sight in the hallways but the journey to the library was in complete privacy. The tension was palpable and Charlotte was unsure if it was the weight of what needed to be discussed or the intense desire to be wrapped in each other that made the quiet take on such awkward heaviness.

Once the door was locked, Charlotte did the only thing she could think of to delay the conversation she secretly dreaded. The one that would make her truly a scarlet woman, as bad as the women she wrote about. Worse because of the child she'd dragged into the whole mess. So she thrust it all away, pushed him up against the door and kissed him.

He tasted every bit as good as he had the week before. Better even, for she'd not had the opportunity to adjust to him for the whole of the morning. He was like opium, or at least what she imagined opium to be, sweet and enticing and dangerous to her sanity. He would not let her be the aggressor for long and he gripped her bum in large hands and lifted her up his body. She wrapped her legs around his thighs for support and he walked them unsteadily toward their chaise, the one whose fabric she'd felt against her fingertips in the quiet of her bed when she was on the edge of dreaming.

His eagerness to kiss her while carrying her was their downfall and he lost his footing before being able to lay her out on the chaise in true romantic fashion. She managed to land on her feet but he ended up sprawled on the floor in a highly undignified manner. There was a moment of shocked silence and then she began to giggle. His loud guffaws soon followed as he propped himself up on his elbows. He was gorgeous as he laughed and she knew that the last little piece of her reserve had melted away. She was in love.

Her knees went a bit weak with this revelation and she clutched at the arm of the chaise behind her, trying to stay firm on the floor as her thoughts scattered in a million directions. They snapped into focus though when she felt warm hands on her calves. She looked down into hot blue eyes and saw the surprise and pleasure there at the discovery he was making.

She had worn her green wool dress, with a small print of yellow flowers. She wore it rarely, as it had been so altered to fit her during her pregnancy that it was a bit shapeless now. One would think that it was not a desirable thing to wear a shapeless old dress when going to meet with one's lover. But not every woman had the lurid

imagination of Charlotte Mallory. The dress was so shapeless that undergarments that were normally de rigueur to be seen in polite society were quite optional. And she'd taken the less clothed of those options.

So, when Richard Wilcox ran his hand up smooth firm calves and tense hot thighs, he found nothing to impede his progress. No stockings. No garters. No petticoats or pantaloons. Just warm naked skin that had made her feel powerful and terrified all day long. His growl of appreciation and the fierce look on his face before he dived beneath the woolen skirt showed her it was all worth it.

His lips tickled the soft hair of her sex and caressed those glistening lips already parted in passion and his tongue stroked her clit hard before setting a light teasing rhythm. Standing was almost impossible and she would have fallen if not for her grip on the end of the chaise and his grip on her thighs. She still could not believe her body's response to him, to this, flashing through her like lightning during a warm summer storm. But all too soon he stopped, causing her to whimper in frustration and he stood, her skirt gripped in one hand, as he spun her around. He thrust up against her bum, the wool of his trousers rough on her smooth skin. Trapping her skirt against her waist, he made slow progress with the long string of buttons down the back and she smiled secretly in knowing that he wasn't that practiced at such a task. He pulled up roughly and she was naked except for her half-boots. She'd been so daring as to leave off stays or a chemise, knowing somehow that he'd want her naked, no matter how unattractive she thought she was.

He definitely liked it. She could feel him grow even harder against her ass as his hands skimmed across her naked back, rounding over her ribs and taking the weight of her breasts in his hands. He leaned down over her, pinning her to the arm of the chaise, she felt his teeth sink into the skin over her shoulder, sending delicious shudders of pleasure-pain and leaving goose bumps in his wake. Then he moved one hand to her hip and the other to release his cock. She held her breath as she felt the tip of him against her entrance and exhaled hard when she felt him sink into her slowly.

It hurt, yes. But it wasn't accompanied by a vague sense of wrongness and terror like her first time had been with Sinjin. This was only heat and stretching and rightness and... God, he was big. He filled her completely, she was going to split open and enjoy it. Both hands on her hips, he pulled her back against him tightly and she found she'd clenched her fists enough for her nails to indent her skin, all to try and fight the instinct to wail. He slid within her surely, easily and began to hit something inside her that made stars appear against her closed eyelids.

Then it was faster, harder, his fingers holding her tight enough to bruise, the slapping of his sac making the most erotic of noises and the sensation driving her mad. She was climbing a mountain and was so close to the top she could taste it. So very close.

He was whispering to her. The sounds of heavy breathing and slapping skin had been all she'd ever known. Her husband had been fast and terse, throwing insults before and after, with nothing but grunts during the act. But the deep, satisfying voice of the man within her, around her, vibrated across her skin, wrapping its tendrils through her mind and body.

"You're thinking too hard, Charlotte." His rhythm never faltered and all she could do was moan in response. Then he drew back slightly, only to thrust back with incredible strength, then to draw back again too fast. She cried out in protest but that wasn't enough for him. Another thrust and she was trying to thrust back onto him, seeking that elusive goal she'd been so close to achieving. Then she felt the slap of his hand on her ass followed by a hard thrust. She could feel her grip on sanity shift, the force building inside her fighting its way out.

"You're so damned beautiful. Scream for me." His voice was so low and hoarse it was otherworldly, his command, undeniable, followed by another slap, another hard thrust so deep she broke, screaming, feeling so full that she couldn't contain it anymore.

It felt like she had been floating for hours but it was only moments. He was still thrusting inside her, slowly and carefully, as though keeping tight control over himself.

She wanted to give him the same gift of freedom and rammed back against him, forcing him off his carefully constructed rhythm. He swore and thrust erratically a few more times, heightening her arousal yet again, until he pulled out suddenly. Thrusting against the valley of her buttocks, she felt him spurt warm against the skin of her back and then the weight of him as he leaned against her, pinning her to the arm of the chaise, hands on either side of her hips.

She gasped for air, still unable to comprehend the incredible feelings she'd been gifted with. Then, she felt his hands against her back, rubbing his essence into her skin, marking her as his and she throbbed at the thought. She arched against him, unbelieving that she could purr like a cat, that she'd want him hot and hard inside her all over again. She felt his fingers touching her again and her eyes opened wide in response. He stroked her clit softly, then he thrust two fingers into her hard. It was not as good as his cock but even this echo sent her flying again, practically sobbing with too much sensation.

She was unsure whether her boneless legs dragged them down, or he collapsed and took her with him but he enfolded her in his arms as they knelt on the floor, her legs inside his knees. She felt small, safe, protected. It felt...wonderful.

Until the urgent knock on the library door. And the muffled voice of an upstairs maid, "Mrs. Mallory? Can you come up to the nursery, ma'am? I'm afraid Master Andrew has taken ill."

* * * * *

Richard Wilcox would not say that he'd just had the best five days of his life. Far from it. He was worried. Worried about his son, worried about Andrew Mallory but most of all, he worried about Andrew Mallory's mother.

He'd never known a woman could dress so quickly. Or turn quite so cold and pale after being warm and rosy a moment beforehand. He had seen a hundred emotions crossing Charlotte's countenance but he had not a clue what to say, other than to do up her buttons and run behind her up the stairs, making sure that she did not fall and harm herself in her great haste.

Andrew was moaning rather piteously and had a bit of a fever. He was not quite at death's door and Richard could almost feel Charlotte's relief as her stance shifted slightly. He could also see that she was horribly conflicted, ashamed even. He himself felt rather abashed at what they had done. They still had not discussed anything but had coupled as though drawn together inexorably by animal lust.

Why did he feel such guilt? Because it was obvious she felt she had done wrong? That he wanted to make it all right somehow and he was unsure how? In business, he was a man of action, not one to dither about waiting for life and opportunity to pass him by. So this waiting...waiting to understand what exactly it was he felt for her, waiting as if the answer would just fall from the clouds as he looked out the window, all this waiting was driving him barmy.

He'd sent Charlotte and a bundled up Andrew home in the carriage and the driver had said that Mrs. Mallory had still looked quite worried when they'd alighted at their address on Haversham Street. So, Richard had sent word to his personal physician, dispatched him to look at Andrew and waited for word of the boy. Fortunately, there was no indication that it was serious and the physician would comment on little else when he'd arrived much later in Richard's study. The boy would be fine but Dr. Wilson had made a point to check on Theo as well, given the nature of childhood illnesses.

With a day, Theo was down with a chill and complaining vociferously about being forced to stay abed and about the thin gruel and weak tea that Nanny Greene was trying to feed him. Richard was sure that the scene was very similar where Charlotte lived. He found himself barely able to think of anything else but seeing her again and talking to her, though he was not yet sure of what he would have to say. It just seemed so very illogical to need someone that he had not yet known for a month.

Within three more days, Theo was doing well, though Miss Greene still insisted on simple foods and an overabundance of clothing. Without the distraction of worrying about his son and business going well with the work of his excellent secretary, he was at a loss how to deal with the overwhelming need to see Charlotte Mallory again.

So, by eleven in the morning, he simply ceased to fight it. Calling for his carriage, he told the driver to take him to the address at which Mrs. Mallory and her son lived and tried not to analyze too closely the brief look that the man gave him. On the way, he allowed himself to become immersed in the memory of her—the length of her naked torso, the weight of her unrestrained breasts, the heat of her center, the passion of her cries. Finding her naked beneath the thin fabric of her dress had made him wild. She was eroticism incarnate, surpassing his fantasies, exceeding even his beloved Fallen Angel in how best to satisfy the beast within him. She drove him to lengths he'd never experienced—a need to mark her, to claim her as his, even if he didn't know what his needs translated to in the real world yet. Her passion was true passion. Not feigned as he had known before. Not calculated for what it would get her, what she could bargain for in return for stroking his ego. Her ardor, her climax—climaxes if he was going to be vain—were raw and real and utterly captivating. It was true, though he had no idea why he was so certain of her. He had yet to decipher what all of this meant when the carriage arrived at its destination.

It was not a bad neighborhood, it was certainly respectable but it was not the best of them either. People here worked hard and the homes were small and clean, stacked up upon each other and content in their crowdedness. He could hear the laughter of

children. He knocked upon the front door of the apartment house and a dour old woman met him there, examining him to the minutest detail and giving no proffered greeting.

“Madam, I am looking for Mrs. Mallory. Mrs. Charlotte Mallory. Does she reside here?”

She sniffed and looked around him at the carriage. “She does. And I know she’s been traveling in that there coach now and again these past few weeks. I’ll have you know, I’ll abide nothing funny going on in this house, sir! There are no gentlemen allowed in this establishment without a proper chaperone and no one at all after the hour of six!”

Richard tried to suppress an irritated smirk. “I assure you, madam, that I only wish to inquire as to the health of Mrs. Mallory and her son Andrew. Andrew is a friend of my son, Theodore Wilcox. And, I am reasonably certain that Mrs. Mallory resides here with an elderly aunt. Would she be a sufficient chaperone?”

The woman huffed but backed in a bit and let him walk through the door. She turned on her heel without a word and led him up a set of worn but clean stairs to one set of rooms. She gave a terse knock on the door and then traipsed back down the stairs, leaving him standing on the landing.

When this door opened, it revealed an older woman, still reasonably well preserved, with graying hair and an elegant nose and a face that seemed like it could still see the humor in humanity’s condition. She looked remarkably like Charlotte might, after many years and he had the sudden thought that he would like to see that exact thing someday...Charlotte’s face while laughing with her grandchildren.

He shook off his impolite silence and opened his mouth to speak but was quite beaten to it by the woman. “You are perhaps Mr. Wilcox?”

He blinked and answered in the affirmative.

“Ah good. Perhaps you can shake Charlotte out of whatever funk she’s dug herself into. She’s asleep right now but she told me to wake her up in an hour and it’s half

again past that. Oh, where have my manners gone, that I should forget to introduce myself to a handsome gentleman! Miss Jane Marshall, Charlotte's aunt." She gave him her hand, which he took with equal dignity.

"Your servant, ma'am. And yes, I would like to see Charl— Mrs. Mallory, if at all possible. I don't wish to disturb her though, if she needs rest. I could just as easily wait outside for a time..."

Miss Marshall cut him off, "Pish posh. Do come in." She opened the door, revealing a tiny but neat parlor, the exception being the small pile of toys and a writing slate piled to one side in the corner. "I'll be back in a few minutes, once I've convinced her that she looks presentable."

She swept away and he looked with curiosity to the room around him. He felt like a giant in the small room and looked at the diminutive loveseat and its various embroidered cushions, worried if it would fall apart should he sit on it. Instead, he strained his ears to hear the sound of her voice, even muffled in the other room and looked around at the bookshelves and their titles and the small miniatures and paintings and samplers that decorated the walls, including a scribble drawn in charcoal that was most likely Andrew's work. There seemed to be such a small space for living but every bit of it was used and somehow organized, though what system it could be he had not a clue. The only truly cluttered bit other than Andrew's things was the tiny desk dropping out of a shelf, covered with a thick collection of blotted papers. They had been hastily covered with some kind of lace cloth, in order to hide either the contents of the documents or the mess they made. But, as the seconds passed and only edges of the whispered conversation and rustling could be detected from the other room, he found his curiosity about Charlotte and her life could not be pushed aside.

He was here, after all. He'd thoroughly embarrassed himself by traveling across London in the middle of the day just to see the woman. It was certain that they could not have the kind of conversation which needed to take place with Miss Marshall here. No matter how understanding the lady might be.

So, giving in to temptation, he stood by the desk, lifted the cloth and looked at the pages that caused Charlotte's fingers to be permanently ink-stained. Within half a page, he knew. He knew her, deep down. He knew what he needed to do.

Chapter Four

Charlotte could have gladly throttled her Aunt Jane. If she wasn't the only relative Charlotte had who was even halfway decent and obviously showed such love and affection for Andrew, Charlotte felt at least a good hair pulling was in order. The woman needed a life of her own, rather than mulling over her past and amusing herself over the troubled present of others. The meddling old thing had let Richard Wilcox into the flat! That gorgeous, lustful man who probably was going to make her an offer to be his mistress and Aunt Jane had let him in to see the tiny little cluttered place she dared to call home. It was simply horrible.

She rushed around, muttering outrageous comments in a voice just loud enough to give Aunt Jane fits of giggles. Aunt Jane had too much of an appreciation for the ridiculous. What on earth was she going to wear? Or what would he expect her to be wearing after her horridly shameful performance of last week. He'd probably want her to come out in red garters and black lace, or completely in her altogether. She stopped tearing through her wardrobe and simply stood for a moment.

She didn't really want to be his mistress. Perhaps his lover but she did well enough for herself that she didn't want to be his paid toy. She didn't want her life controlled like that. She enjoyed her writing. She enjoyed the independence she had achieved. If he wanted her, he'd just have to accept her as is. No matter that he'd given her pleasure that made her knees shake and sapped her will. She'd rather live without it than give up her self-respect. Wouldn't she?

A frightful mess, that's what she looked like, still in her voluminous night rail, the thick padded dressing gown and thin worn slippers that she favored. Her hair was piled in a messy lopsided bun on her head. She'd just woken from the first real sleep she'd had in days, after falling into an exhausted heap earlier in the morning. Andrew

had not been that sick she supposed but her natural inclination to worry over him, combined with the guilt she'd felt over her libidinous actions and concern over what Richard must think of her had made sleep a far away dream against the backdrop of the multitude of voices clamoring in her brain.

It did not help that the loathsome little man who was her penny-pinching publisher had arrived at her doorstep yesterday afternoon, leering at her and making a general pig of himself eating biscuits that should have been Andrew's and pressing her to finish her current novella before the due date he'd originally given her. She'd spent a good portion of the previous night writing by candlelight before Andrew had woken and complained loudly of the inability to find his mummy. So, she'd slept like the dead and Andrew had been up for hours with Auntie Jane and he had just gone down for his nap again when Richard had arrived. Andrew had slept on in their shared bedroom, through all of her muffled theatrics with Aunt Jane. Charlotte had every intension of keeping the upcoming discussion with Mr. Richard Wilcox civil and ladylike. Andrew needed his nap after all. It wouldn't do to wake him with raised voices. Charlotte had every reason to believe that given the passion bubbling beneath Mr. Wilcox's calm exterior, once he entered into an argument he'd be voluble about expressing his views. Or he'd simply grab her and kiss the living daylights out of her.

Before she succumbed to temptation and tried to primp, she tightened the belt of her dressing gown securely around her waist and swept out the door, her aunt still trying to suppress laughter behind her. In a trice, she was presented with the long limbed, elegantly attired gentleman of her lurid fantasies standing on the faded floral rug, hat in one hand and red hair tousled about in a most charming fashion, looking down with unparalleled intensity at some pages on her desk. Pages that she'd written last night and done an ill job of concealing. Pages involving an Italian sculptor with large agile hands and a marked ability to worship the female body. Especially the female body of her heroine, a British lady trapped in an Italy controlled by Napoleonic forces.

This was not a good thing. Not at all.

She could not control her gasp of displeasure and his eyes snapped up to her. Well, perhaps they lingered for a bit on her inelegant attire but soon enough, she could see the expression in his eyes. Filled with piercing heat and something akin to triumph, Charlotte began to wonder just who exactly Mr. Richard Wilcox was. He would have a great deal of power over her, given that writing erotic literature was a rather dangerous, illicit profession and for a woman with a child, even more so. Would he use this to get whatever he desired out of her? Her stomach, empty after having taken no breakfast, sank into a hard little knot of worry. The truth was, he wouldn't even need to use this against her. Given that her body was already reaching out to his, nipples taut, folds damp, with just the sight of him and the possession she saw in his eyes.

The silence was broken when Aunt Jane appeared again, looking back and forth between the two of them with a wry grin. Richard was the first to speak and his words robbed Charlotte of speech.

"Miss Marshall, I trust that if Master Andrew has recovered from his ailment, perhaps you might be able to watch over him for a few hours while I show something very important to your niece?"

Charlotte opened her mouth at his presumption and even Aunt Jane blinked for a bit, before nodding sagely. "Andrew is quite on the mend. Feel free to take Charlotte someplace where she can find some of her humor. I'm afraid it has quite disappeared of late."

Charlotte stamped her foot in rage and glared at her aunt and her lover in turn but that did not stop Richard from putting on his hat and grabbing her hand, pulling her toward the door. She fought back, struggling against his iron grip and snorting in anger but he managed to get her out of the door, down the staircase and almost into the street before she finally found her voice.

“What are you thinking! I’ve not got proper clothes on to go out of my rooms, much less out on the street! I haven’t even shoes!” she hissed, wary that the sour landlady, Mrs. Hearst, would come out and gossip relentlessly about this scene for years.

Richard smiled lazily. “Easy enough to solve.” And he bent, put one arm behind her knees and picked her up off her feet, one faded pink slipper falling unceremoniously off her foot on to the threshold.

She suppressed her howl of outrage and clung to his neck, sending him a poison-filled look that would have been enough to kill a lesser man. But he merely continued to smirk, all the way out the door and into his carriage.

When he deposited her upon the seat across from him and turned to draw shut the door, it was hard to ignore the part of her that wanted those arms around her again and hold fast to indignation at such treatment of her person. With a lurch, the driver had them off and she was faced with the scrutiny of eyes as blue as the base of a flame.

His smile suddenly became softer as he looked at her flushed face. “You are so very beautiful, Charlotte. Every bit of you.” The sound of her name on his lips sent shivers down her spine and raised the raw memory of the last time he’d voiced her name, along with the slap of his hand on her ass and the hard thrust of him within her.

She shuddered but attempted to remain somewhat aloof. Utterly at his mercy, without her reticule or shoes or even pantaloons, she had no doubts that given the loyalty of his staff and the coiled power in his form, he could do whatever he pleased with her. But she refused to let that intimidate her into meekness. “I have yet to see every bit of you, sir, otherwise, I might return the complement.”

The cocky grin returned. As did his silence. He stared at her for the short trip from her respectable but hardworking neighborhood to his refined, established one. Unable to trust herself, she stared out the window. Her hair began to fall completely from its haphazard arrangement and she lifted her arms to fix it, only to have him grip her wrist. “Leave it be, please. Your hair is glorious.”

Her hair was plain and long and brown, like that of a million other Englishwomen. But when such a man told her that hair was glorious and he wanted it down, she left it down. Independence be damned. It was wonderful to feel pretty, even for a moment and Richard with his fiery hair and combustible glances made her feel like a veritable Aphrodite.

They pulled into the mews at the back of the townhouse, not to the front door and this time, with nowhere to run to for sanctuary, she allowed him to escort her, one foot bare and the other in a tattered slipper, past curious but silent servants into, not the library but his study. He locked the door and she took in the thick Aubusson carpet, deep green walls, the mahogany desk, the warm fire in the grate, the rich leather desk chair and the walls full of books and ledgers. This was a man's domain and it was beautiful and terrifying all at once.

She stood, not knowing what was going to follow, be it ravishment, blackmail, or a game of whist. She did not expect to see Richard begin to pull off his starched white cravat and flick open the fastenings at his sleeves. Watching in intense fascination, Charlotte barely breathed as the mysteries of gentlemen's fashion were revealed, with the removal of top coat, waistcoat and then the fine lawn shirt. He arched a copper-red eyebrow at her and she felt that, given the sudden heat of the room and the remarkable sight of the spattering of curly red hair along a broad chest, she could at least remove her one slipper and her dressing gown.

Once the padded grey robe hit the floor, he turned away from her, moving to the opposite side of the large desk, carefully picking up a jar of ink and placing it on a book shelf. Then she jumped as he took one long arm and swept the rest of his organized desk to the floor. Her heart rate began to climb as she suddenly had a very good idea of what might happen next. Who could really blame her if her feet led around the edge of the desk and toward him and that she made no great protest when he put his hands around her waist and sat her atop the expanse?

He took no other liberties, no matter how willing her body was to accept them. Instead, he sat on the comfortable chair that seemed molded to him and proceeded to yank off his boots and stockings. She licked her dry lips and soon enough, her unconscious prayers were rewarded as he stood, shucked off trousers and small clothes and was revealed in all his glory, from large feet to hard thighs, broad chest to engorged cock. She sucked in a giant breath after almost fainting from lack of air—he was definitely a man who could make a woman forget to breathe.

He gave her a long hard stare and she succumbed, pulling the unflattering night rail up her legs, then awkwardly around her bum on the cold desk and then over her head, as naked as he. Exposed and shaken.

Still, he didn't touch her, though she could see his cock throb in response. He sat and pulling his chair up to the desk as though she was a book of ledgers, he bent slightly to get at one of the lower drawers. She let out the slightest sound of frustration and his hands changed direction, suddenly gripping the muscles of her thighs as his head descended to her. His tongue lapped with the lightest of touches at her already parted folds and she tilted her hips, trying to give him better access, feeling the tension drain from her as she simply gave herself up to the demands of her body.

Then, just as she almost lost herself in the rough feel of his tongue against her most sensitive flesh, he stopped, planting a light kiss on the inside of her thigh and bending again to the damned desk drawer. She was sorely tempted to kick him but was also intrigued by what could be so important as to call to him while a woman was spread out before him like a banquet.

He fiddled with the drawer, opening it and doing something complicated with a recessed latch until a hidden compartment was revealed. And then he pulled out three books and set them next to her hip. Three books that she knew very, very well. After all, she had written them. She blinked, suddenly tense again and completely befuddled.

He picked up one of the books and held it up as though he was a solicitor before a court presenting evidence. She could not help but worry that this was some kind of a

trial and she thought she knew the charges against her, she had no idea of the possible sentences.

“*A Refuge in Fantasy*, by a mysterious author called only Fallen Angel.” His face was intense, the honesty in his confession undeniable. “I happened upon this book purely by accident, as someone else had left it carelessly under a chair at my club. My wife had left me some days before and I, not interested in cards that night, I picked it up as a diversion over drowning myself in my brandy and I must admit, it was hours before I could put the book down. Dominique, your émigré shopgirl and her vivid daydreams about the men who entered her bookshop made me hope that women could be just as passionate as men. And afterward, I admit I had to visit a very exclusive house of pleasure, something I have done very rarely, because I had never been so very aroused in my lifetime.”

Charlotte exhaled, awe filling her. She had never spent too long wondering who purchased and read her books, she was only happy that they did. She spent her days playing with her son and writing fantasies out of her imagination and both made her tremendously happy. The thought that such a man, intelligent, capable and incredibly sexy, had read her books filled her with desire she had never imagined possible.

He went on though, putting down *Refuge* with care and picking up another thin novella. “This one, though, I had to search through six bookstores to find. The bookseller agreed to send me notice if any more works by this Fallen Angel should come to light and when this one appeared, I had it delivered posthaste. I enjoyed it even more, if that is possible. Angel, in this book, had the most vivid descriptions of the exotic Bengali settings enjoyed by the stalwart British sea captain and the princess who seduces him. Perhaps the grasp of politics left something to be desired,” he grinned at her indignant snort, “but the sensuality of it, their devotion and passion, came through quite well. I had to be satisfied with my lonely hand this time though, for I was quite sure anything less than the Princess Sita herself could not have quenched my needs.”

He stood then and leaning over her, placing *My Kingdom is You* by her side. Though her eyes were riveted on his face, she could feel him still hard against her. When he backed away ever so slightly, holding her latest book, she couldn't suppress the frown on her face. "But this is my Angel's best work to date. A lonely widow in the English countryside and the farmer who lures her into knowing passion. Caroline Fairfax made me wish that there really were women who wanted men for themselves and not simply for what the men could do for their status. By now, I was quite sure that Fallen Angel must be a woman."

He tossed *Forbidden Fruits* on the desk and pressed his hips to hers, holding her eyes with his own as the tip of his cock pressed against her wet entrance. One hand held her hip, as the other hand crept between them and began stroking her clit with an uneven rhythm meant to lead to madness. She whimpered, thrusting her hips to capture him but he held firm, fingers digging into the generous flesh of her hip, his cock teasing her entrance with its closeness.

"My Angel wrote such sad endings though. After all the lust was satiated and desire quelled, these ladies always seemed to lose their lovers to duty or disease or political machinations and then they go off into seclusion or some such nonsense. I was determined, if I ever met this Angel and she was not a dried-up old crone, I would simply have to prove to her that men have more mettle than she gives them credit for."

His cock slid inside her ever so slightly and she curled her hips up, grasping at it with internal muscles she barely knew she had. His fingers were still teasing her clit and she was at the edge of her sanity. She moved her hands from behind her where they supported her weight and threaded them through his arms, gripping his firm ass and pulling him against her. He slid deep inside her and groaned, his hand leaving bruises on her hip and his muscles shaking with the effort not to pound into her.

"Then prove it to me, damn you!" her voice was raw, reflecting her intense need. He was hot and hard within her and she wanted the friction of him, skin slapping

against skin. She wanted to feel him come hot inside her, to know that she was his, no matter what that meant. Her heart was already lost to him.

He moved both hands to her hips. His voice was hoarse and his cock was buried inside her but he would not be deterred from finishing his critique, "I thought, that if I ever found a woman like Angel, much less the authoress herself, that I'd simply have to fuck her."

"Yes!" She arched against him, giving his chest a long lick and dug her nails into his ass. "Yes, please!"

He chuckled and she could feel his cock move within her with the laugh. She was on the cusp of screaming for him to fuck her until they broke the desk, when the serious look on his face stopped her cold.

"And, if she was as passionate as her books, as devoted and sensuous a lover, then, well, I'd simply have to marry her."

She blinked stupidly. "What?"

He pulled out and thrust into her again, then captured her lips in a fierce, mind-numbing kiss. Her eyes were still closed when he backed away a hairsbreadth from her lips, still shallowly stroking his cock in and out of her. She could feel him whisper more than she could hear it but she was certain of his words. "Marry me, Charlotte. My Angel."

He thrust hard and she convulsed with a soft soaring orgasm. Before she could catch her breath or think about what had just happened, he pushed her back on the desk, his hands covering her breasts as he bent from the knees to pump up into her, hitting some spot within her that sent sparks fluttering across her vision. Her legs wrapped around his hips and her hands clung to the edge of the desk so she could thrust back against him. Her voice rose in crescendo with pleading to the heavens for the sweet torture not to end. His hands suddenly landed with a thump on either side of her and his pace increased hard and fast.

“Answer me, Charlotte! I love you, damn it to hell! Answer.” Low and rough, that voice meant business.

“Yes!” she shouted and came again, tears in the corners of her eyes. She felt him spurt hot within her, her muscles squeezing him, making both of them forget that they were not always one being.

Her breathing was still fast as she curled her arms around him, the comfort of his weight the only thing that made her certain that this had not been just a magnificent dream. His fingers stroked her hair in mindless fascination and the sound of his breathing was loud in her ringing ears.

Unsure of just how to deal with her new reality, she found refuge in the inane impertinence that seemed to have served well in the past. “Much as I love you, Richard, perhaps your first act as fiancé might be to obtain some shoes for me? Perhaps some suitable clothes as well? I don’t think you’d want to introduce me to the servants as your future wife while I’m in my nightclothes.”

He lifted his head from her shoulder and blinked at her, then broke out into full throated laughter she could hear and feel as he was still within her, though spent. He pulled himself upward and she felt him ease out of her. Then, wrapping one arm under her and hooking one of her legs with his elbow, he dragged her with him as he collapsed into the chair behind him. He held her against him as close as she’d ever been to another adult and she’d never felt more loved and protected. And she knew that from then on, Fallen Angel could write only happy endings for her heroines. Her heart was too full to allow for anything else.

* * * * *

Jane Marshall found herself once again watching as Charlotte rounded up all the clothing required for a little boy to go out into possibly inclement weather. Only this time, there were two sets of boots, two hats, and the endless struggle to keep not two, but four mittens from disappearing. And some eight months after the last time she’d

gone all maudlin, instead of a winter's day that was increasingly spring-like, the weather was turning colder on a brisk autumn day. And it wasn't the preparation to ride across London to a fine townhouse, it was preparation to go out for a long walk in the soft rolling hills of their new Cheshire country home.

Andrew and Theodore ran off ahead as Mr. and Mrs. Wilcox linked arm in arm and strolled after them, heads bent in conversation, a rosy glow evident on Charlotte's cheeks. Jane thought it more than likely that that blush was due to something in Richard's words, but given how often they seemed to enjoy each other's company it was just as likely that Charlotte was in the family way, and likely to give the two boys, who enjoyed calling each other "Brudda", another sibling very soon.

The first time Jane had caught them, it had been the day before their small simple wedding. They had all been moved into the Wilcox townhouse for the few days before the ceremony and Charlotte had sought Jane's aid in arranging wedding clothes and the breakfast and the various and sundry details that plagued even the most simple of ceremonies. Jane was not dull-witted and she knew that Charlotte did not want her to feel abandoned by her marriage. On the contrary, Jane was excited and happy for Charlotte, thrilled that the girl had finally managed to grasp onto a bit of happiness for herself. Any concerns Jane had felt over Mr. Wilcox's treatment of her niece were put to rest when she'd found herself locked in the library with them.

She'd been toward the back, between rows of bookshelves, enjoying being able to select anything she wished from such a large collection. Then there were footsteps, an uncharacteristic giggle and the sound of the door closing firmly and locking.

A moment of mostly silence, filled with something Jane suspected was a rather impassioned kiss.

"Richard! Someone could still be in here!" Charlotte whispered, her voice insistent but far from strident.

Richard cleared his throat, his voice thick and deep with unrepressed passion, "Someone? Anyone? Please come out and show yourself or be prepared for quite a show!"

Jane was quite frozen by that statement, and Richard Wilcox seemed unwilling to give her the time to thaw into proper action.

So, with embarrassment, curiosity and more than a touch of amusement, Jane was audience to a thorough and sweet seduction of her niece.

Murmured endearments and soft sighs were accompanied by the distinct rustle of clothing. Jane simply sat on the floor at the back of the library, biting on a knuckle to keep from laughing at the ridiculousness of her situation. Unless she was mistaken, the purpose for the lovely chaise longue, which did not quite fit in with the decorative theme of the masculine leather chairs, became rather clear.

The sounds became a bit harsher, composed of unrestrained oaths and the sound of skin against skin, and Jane fought the temptation to hum to cover the noise. One would really rather not know this about a girl almost considered a daughter. Still, at least she knew Mr. Wilcox certainly knew what he was about and Charlotte was getting much needed relief of pre-wedding tension. Jane realized that, given the enthusiasm of the couple, it was probably a wise idea not to wait more than two weeks between betrothal and the exchange of vows.

Despite that particular experience, or perhaps because of it, Jane found herself accepting the generous offer of Mr. and Mrs. Wilcox to become part of their household. She found that she had grown too attached to Charlotte and Andrew, and was in danger of being equally enamored of Mr. Wilcox, who had insisted she call him Richard, and little Theodore. Jane, much like Charlotte, had never known a real, loving family and she found that even at her age, it was truly a wonderful thing to be a part of.

The love that the two newlyweds had for their children was heartwarming, and observing how that love—and their love for each other—bloomed over the spring and summer was a show she was glad not to miss. The casual touches, the intense

passionate debates over everything from political issues to musical merit, the knowing smiles, the small acts of caring and concern on both their parts, all of it spoke clearly of a love that would only deepen. She had to admit, a tiny part of her filled with longing.

One day, not two months into their marriage, an express arrived during breakfast, and Jane was there to observe Charlotte's reaction to the most remarkable action on the part of her new husband. Richard's face had grown uncharacteristically solemn as he perused the contents of the missive, and he raised those blue eyes to Charlotte, full of some emotion which Jane, a consummate student of human expression, could only call trepidation.

Charlotte simply pinned him with a look, saying, "Richard, whatever it is, say it. You know how impatient I am, good news or bad. There is little that could truly distress me, for I am quite certain of our combined ability to handle adversity." She arched an eyebrow at him, challenging him to do his worst.

He laughed, and a smile returned to his eyes. Jane could easily see what Charlotte had found so very attractive about the man. "It is nothing so dire, my love. Simply, I sent out some inquiries some time ago, and I have received a most unexpected response from my business agent." He paused a moment, a touch of the concern apparent on his face. "I know my dear, that we are all happy here, but two small boys in a townhouse day in day out is probably a bit much to handle, for us or the servants. I considered the possibility of acquiring a house in the country."

Charlotte's green eyes had grown wide, and Jane chuckled to herself at the spectacle of girlish glee at such a proposal fighting with hard-learned frugality. Jane knew how much Charlotte had missed the country, its peaceful silences and long walks. Richard held up a hand when Charlotte tried to interrupt with protestations of utter happiness, "No, my dear, I think it would be a fine thing for our boys, and for us, to have some time in the country, and I will not be gainsaid by unnecessary penny-pinching. That is not why I am concerned about this note. You see," he drew a deep breath, "I actually enquired about your estate, rather, your father's estate."

Charlotte's face drained of a bit of its high color, and she blinked once. She took a steadying breath and simply nodded. Jane found herself doing the same, wondering how this could play out and whether she could bring herself to remove to such a place, knowing that Martha had died there, utterly alone.

Richard continued, "Your cousin, the man who inherited the property, seems to have quickly acquired a considerable mortgage, and now is very interested in selling the house and all its contents. This missive is to enquire as to my interest."

Charlotte stared straight ahead, the responsibility of just a decision resting uneasily on shoulders that had carried so much. "I-I know not..." She clenched her eyes shut, and before Jane could rise from her chair and go and comfort her niece, Richard was there, arms around her, absorbing her silent tears into the gray merino of his morning coat.

"Perhaps," Jane found herself speaking, even before she had fully formed the thought, "there are too many memories." Richard and Charlotte both nodded silently.

Jane had removed herself from the dining room, closing the door behind her and observing a tender kiss between the two lovers, the soft caress of Charlotte's fingers through the short red hair just above her husband's temple as he held her close, trying to pull her pain into himself.

Months later, when a trip was announced to see a prospective property in Cheshire, one county away from Charlotte's Derbyshire childhood home, Jane was no longer worried about Charlotte's reaction, as she saw only excitement in the eyes of her niece and both of her great-nephews at the prospect of early summer in the rolling hills and ancient ruins near the town of Congleton.

Charlotte had been especially pleased with the one thing Richard had rescued from the bits and pieces of her father's estate, and that was the entire contents of her beloved library. Watching Charlotte walking through the shelves filled with comforting old friends brought back memories of the first time Jane had ever met Charlotte, squirreled away amongst all these books and hiding from the world. This time, Charlotte had

unencumbered joy in her eyes and she threw her arms about her husband and kissed him with abandon, causing the boys to squeal and the new housekeeper to titter. As she shepherded the boys into their new nursery, Jane knew that it would not be a good idea for herself, or the children, or even any of the servants to enter the library at Rosmere House in the foreseeable future without announcing themselves quite loudly.

Jane wondered though, what she was doing with herself, pulling herself out of London to go traipsing across the country, when she should be quietly at some small home, reading a book by poor light and fading into her happy memories. The life and laughter she felt in the presence of her niece's newly created family brought her happiness true, but it also made her feel that the world was not quite done with her yet.

Two weeks into their stay at Rosmere House, Jane found herself quite in love with the Cheshire countryside and quite flustered at the visits the family had received from their next door neighbor, Mr. Frommer. Mr. Frommer had been an acquaintance long ago in Portsmouth, a successful shopkeeper who had done very well thanks to his business acumen. He was now retired to the country, his wife having passed away, and his daughter settled in nearby Manchester.

Mr. Frommer knew who—knew what—she had been, and yet he still came almost everyday to pay his respects, most especially to herself. She had actually found herself blushing at the saucy, questioning looks Charlotte had sent her, not to mention the odd flutter when Mr. Frommer, who was still far from three score years of age and possessed a lean figure and dark black hair, gave her an honest smile. It made her remember that her own two score and six was not truly such an ancient age to have obtained, after all.

So on a warm summer night Jane found that she could not find the refuge of sleep, of old comfortable dreams and she resorted to walking out under the starry skies. That was how she had managed to stumble once again into the very private world of her niece. The moon was bright, and as she stood sheltered by trees at the edge of the secluded pond the estate boasted, she could see the two bodies entwined in the shallow

water along the opposite bank. Charlotte's hair was her only adornment, and Richard's hair glowed even in moonlight, and their pale skin merged into a luminous blur. Charlotte rose above her lover, straddling him as they rocked together in slow passion. Love was evident in the soft murmurs that reached her ears, the possessive grip of large hands on feminine hips, the rapture evident in the paradoxical tension and relaxation that was the act of physical love. The waves they made lapped softly against the water near her own feet, and Jane could feel the undeniable pull of such an act of almost sacred passion.

Jane turned away, the image stirring memories and, more troubling, desires. She was not a passive, elderly thing that had already had her chance at life. Charlotte, who could have simply given up on love and lived out her life with her profession and her son, had taken a chance of finding happiness and it had paid out handsomely. Jane found herself wondering if she were too old to do the same, to seize what life she had before her, and make new memories to warm her when she was in truth old and gray.

Over the months that passed and as summer turned to fall, the family remained in the country, no one quite ready to quit their happy situation. Mr. Arthur Frommer continued his frequent visits and Jane found that she was not at all adverse to his attentions. Charlotte's latest manuscript, *A Second Life to Lead* boasted a witty and wicked woman who was determined to find happiness with the next man to enter her life. Jane rather thought there was a pointed message in that title and had taken that advice to heart. She had let herself engage in living life, rather than merely observing it. Now, walking out with the Wilcoxes and their children in the crisp fall morning, Jane was more than happy to take the arm of her Arthur and wander off down a different path, intent on stealing a few wicked moments for herself.

About the Author

Elaine Lowe is a work-at-home mom in Silicon Valley, California. Of her many part-time jobs, her favorite one by far is writing. She has a background in biotech, but she has branched out into the demanding world of home management, toddler entertainment, transcription, envelope stuffing and of course, writing romantic and erotic fiction.

A love of history, magic and romance combines to inspire a lot of her writing. That and her wonderful husband, who is a fantastic sounding board, support system and research consultant. He really enjoys research. And so does she.

Look for upcoming novels involving forces of nature, a touch of magic, and the idea that sensuality is not specific to any particular time period.

Elaine welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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