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One
**BASHFUL
LADY**

Brenda Williamson

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
512 Forest Lake Drive
Warner Robins, Georgia 31093

One Bashful Lady
Copyright © 2007 by Brenda Williamson

Cover by Scott Carpenter

ISBN: 1-59998-198-X

www.samhainpublishing.com

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: May 2007

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Chapter One

Lady Ainsley Delacorte sat quietly, disturbed by her mother's plotting. She took comfort in the fact the plan, horrific as it was, befell her sister Rowena.

In all her young years, Ainsley had lived through their tears of discontent. Both her mother and her sister overexaggerated their grievances. And this day was no different, maybe worse, since her mother had informed her sister she was to marry.

From that moment, terrible wailing ensued and Rowena wouldn't stop. To most young ladies, a marriage should be grand, festive and looked forward to with an idyllic passion. However, poor Rowena had not selected her betrothed.

Their mother, the Dowager Duchess of Delacorte, did many things out of the ordinary in regards to their lives. After losing their home and most of their finances, the duchess worked diligently to make them appear in favorable light with the ton. Some would think her mother crazy for handing off her daughter to a man without following the common-protocol standards of the day.

But this was a desperate woman in grievous times, willing to take drastic measures to satisfy her needs. It was how Ainsley saw her mother's selfish disregard of Rowena's future.

"Rowena, stop that infernal noise," the duchess ordered. "It is high time you were married. This is an excellent marriage arrangement for you."

Ainsley thought her mother might have shown a hint of compassion for Rowena's plight. While the offer of marriage may have been from a respectable English lord, Rowena could have been forewarned.

Rowena continued to cry hysterically.

Ainsley patted her sister's arm in sympathy.

"You are eldest," the duchess continued with her reasoning. "You absolutely must marry into the English aristocracy to give respect to our name again."

"Why? W-what point is there in that?" Rowena sniffled.

"The marquess is wealthy and as heir apparent to the title of duke, we have a chance to get back all we've lost." The duchess flicked a handkerchief under her nose.

"Whatever does he want with me?"

"A dutiful wife."

Ainsley nodded, mindlessly agreeing. Most men looked for a well-behaved lady to manage their home. They kept mistresses for fun. She knew this well from her father's philandering ways. Her mother knew this even better. The duchess should have commiserated with Rowena since her own marriage had been arranged. The tension between the duchess and Ainsley's father had been like an overwound clock—they never worked right together.

"Ainsley, you're very quiet," her mother commented, as if it were something new.

"She's always quiet, Mother," Rowena said dryly.

Ainsley did everything in her power to prevent her mother from looking her way. She would have snuck away if possible and hid in her room until Rowena's marriage was but a memory.

"Rowena, please think of us. With your marriage to an English nobleman, we'll no longer have to stay here in France," the duchess said.

The conversation continued about the marriage and Ainsley released the breath she'd held from the moment her mother addressed her. Her foot itched and she slid it on the rug in hopes to dispel the irritating sensation.

"I like France," Rowena declared. "I have friends here and they don't know what father has done."

"England is where we belong and you'll marry the marquess," their mother stated again.

For a second, Ainsley thought Rowena had finished her bout of crying. She had just dried up all her sniffles with the embroidered handkerchief Ainsley had made for Rowena's birthday several months earlier.

"Ainsley, can you be of no help in this matter?" Her mother lifted a brow.

Again, Ainsley suffered from not knowing what to say. If given the choice, she would be content to sit mutely in a corner of the room.

In confrontations between her mother and anybody else, she preferred not to get involved. She said nothing and hoped her mother would forget her question.

If the duchess, within her divine, yet limited wisdom, wished to select a husband for Ainsley, who could stop her? Could Ainsley blindly obey and marry a man she'd never met?

"Why can't Ainsley marry first?" Rowena cried.

"Me?" Ainsley squeaked.

She and Rowena were the only two left of four children. Her brothers had died in service to the Crown.

"I love Edgar LeBonnet," Rowena announced. "Not this Lord...Lord, oh whatever his name is!" She stomped her foot, childishly trying to get her mother to listen.

Ainsley often thought Rowena favored their mother in personality as well as looks. She guessed it the reason why Rowena hardly ever agreed with her mother. Stubbornness created a barrier between the women.

"His name is Desmond Rawlington, Marquess of Dunsmore. Now enough of this nonsense. That Frenchman you've been sneaking off to see is as poor as a church mouse and as timid, too. What presence does he possess that would gain our entry back into the English society?" the duchess charged. "The man is nothing and he'll have no sway over English rule."

"I'm happy to remain here and never return to England. Father was horrible to us."

"Rowena," Ainsley breathed.

It didn't stop Rowena's rampaging tirade. "We lost our home to his brother because of him and English law. It is done and we should get on with our lives!" Rowena's voice wavered with emotion.

Her big brown eyes, frozen in a rebellious stare, made Ainsley cringe.

"Oh, Rowena, how can you do this to me?" The duchess held a hand to her breast and waved her crisp, white handkerchief under her nose again. "I shall weep until my death for having a daughter so like her father, so inconsiderate of her family," she wailed with genuine feeling.

Ainsley had witnessed it before. The staged performance never faltered from incident to incident.

"Ainsley, please," Rowena begged for her intervention. *I love him*, she mouthed.

Ainsley didn't want to take part in the growing riff. They constantly put pressure upon her to be their arbitrator. But if she had to intervene, then fairness dictated honesty. In the end, she'd regret responding.

She slid closer to separate the two. Her soft satin shoes scuffed quietly across the tile floor. She looked at her mother and sister, both poised for her involvement. Her mother, appearing the most wounded, said nothing.

The duchess assumed Ainsley would be on her side. Things would be much more unpleasant for her if she took the unwise route of siding with her sister.

She saw no way to avoid getting involved.

"Maybe Rowena could meet the marquess and get to know him before the plans are finalized." Ainsley heaved a labored breath, hoping her mother, in some ill-conceived form of retribution for the suggestion, didn't make Ainsley do things she didn't want to do either.

Content to be the forgotten child, Ainsley loathed the way her mother forced her to attend social functions. People were not her pleasure, but

her distress. Horribly shy when it came to speaking before more than one person at a time, she often hid in empty rooms during parties. No one cared about the youngest Delacorte, especially a girl child.

"That is all I ask, Rowena darling." The duchess brightened. Her feigned grievances slithered away, along with the handkerchief she tucked up her sleeve. Ever the performer, she gracefully moved to her chair in the parlor with the regal air she prized so dearly.

"See, Rowena, nothing is set in stone. Mother asks only for you to meet this man with the possibility of marriage. You'll not be sold into matrimonial bondage." Ainsley turned her head slightly. "Will she, Mother?"

If her mother did not agree, Ainsley needed to prepare for Rowena's breakdown. Ainsley had lived through the upsets before. However, all the wailing and bemoaning about their pitiful plights gave her a headache.

"No, I'd never arrange a marriage without your approval, darling." The duchess appeased Rowena with a wry grin.

Ainsley swallowed down the laugh working its way up her throat. Her mother never sought anyone's approval. If she did, they would still be in England instead of sitting in a borrowed country home in France.

"Oh, all right. I'll meet him. I think it is detestable you would use me. We are still welcome in the best of homes. The ton may be shocked by our departure, but my friends assure me they do not regard us as lepers." Rowena gave a hastened curtsy to her mother. Grabbing Ainsley's hand, she rushed them from the room.

"See, I told you not to worry." Ainsley smiled weakly.

"You and I both know mother. This is serious. She is bullying me into marrying this...this duke's grandson." Rowena stormed across the foyer and clomped up the stairs to the landing. "Mark my word, Ainsley, you will be next. She'll sell me off to the highest bidder and then she'll arrange for you to go live in bondage with some old toad."

"Oh, Rowena, don't say that. Don't even think it. What would I do? What would I say to a man?" She twisted her hands in the folds of her skirt and glanced back at the parlor. "What if you're right?"

The duchess stood in the doorway of the drawing room with a smug, triumphant curl to her lips. Ainsley perceived how right her sister was. Ainsley would be the next puppet her mother had the pleasure of pulling the strings on.

“Well, don’t get all flustered now. I need your cool composure to get me through my ordeal first. You are the calm one when it comes to figuring things out. I don’t see how you can be timorous when your intelligence exceeds that of most people.” Rowena continued up the wide staircase.

Ainsley followed. “I don’t know that I’m that intelligent. But as for figuring things out, I have a lot of time to think.”

“You wouldn’t if you’d go to parties and get out.” Rowena opened the door and floated into her room. The heavy scent of roses drifted in from the open window. “Here, read this.” She handed a folded letter to Ainsley.

“Rowena!” Ainsley looked at her mother’s name scrolled across the face of the crisp linen paper.

“I intercepted it. Mother has bartered a handsome settlement and I’m not to have any say.” She sank down on the red velvet settee. “I’m to become the wife of this marquess.”

“Rowena, this letter says Lord Dunsmore will marry you immediately and take you back to England.”

“Read further. He’s giving mother money for me. She is most certainly selling me. Have you ever heard of such a thing? I’m to have no dowry as customary. He’s taking me without getting a penny.”

“That is odd, but then your baron is willing to marry you without a dowry as well, I presume.”

“We’re in love and he has no one to answer to regarding the decisions he makes.”

“And to think, the marquess wants you as his wife when he hasn’t even met you.” She dropped on the settee next to her sister. “I don’t know what to say. Maybe the marquess is so rich, nothing he is given could compare to his wealth and thus he finds it unimportant.”

The situation was not fair to either of them. Ainsley expected to have time to adjust to becoming the sole person left to the mercy of her mother.

“Well, he’s not going to meet me,” Rowena exclaimed.

“You can’t mean that. You promised mother you’d meet him. At least she didn’t marry you to him by proxy.”

“And that’s why I’m telling you what I’m going to do. It’ll be up to you to prevent mother from being totally humiliated.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m running away and you can’t let mother have me married to the marquess by proxy. I haven’t a clear understanding what she and his grandfather, the Duke of Berkenshire, are up to, but it can’t be good. I’ve heard the talk. Father had dealings with that man and they were unscrupulous.”

“What dealings? Why don’t I know of any of the connections?”

“Because you prefer to stay home instead of socializing. Mother won’t speak of the conspiracy father was involved in with the Rawlingtons, but my friends have. I’ve waited to tell you my plans at the last possible moment because, while I know you mean well, you are mother’s lackey when it comes to spilling the beans. Edgar and I are going to elope tonight. He may not have money, but he has a title and he loves me. His home is simple, yet elegant. I’ll be happy, and once I’m married, mother will not be able to do a thing about it.” Rowena pushed a lock of Ainsley’s hair back. “Oh, please be happy for me, Ainsley.”

“You can’t... Mother will be devastated. Oh my goodness, Rowena, defying mother!” Ainsley jumped up and paced the room. “What will she say when the marquess arrives? It’s simply outrageous. Mother will be mortified, embarrassed. Rowena, don’t do it. Maybe you can talk to the marquess and have him let you out of the contract. He might be a perfectly reasonable man. Why, maybe you’ll even like him.”

Ainsley grasped at every idea. She didn’t want to suffer her mother’s wrath.

“Sorry, Ainsley. You’re so naive, sweetly sheltered from reality.” Rowena swirled a hand under her chin, as if she stroked a porcelain doll. “You’ll learn soon enough, men rule this world. We are nothing more than pawns in their quest for power. Finish reading the letter and you’ll understand. Now run along to your room. I’ve got to get ready for tonight.”

Ainsley quickly folded the letter and tucked it in her pocket. On her way back to her room, she considered Rowena’s words and didn’t think of herself as completely sheltered. She just didn’t interact well. There was a lot to be learned from servants. She looked downstairs at the bustle of people in her mother’s employ. They hurried about, preparing for Lord Dunsmore’s arrival. Her mother had gone all out with extra vases of roses from the garden and expensive champagne.

The duchess was often overbearing and self-centered. Ainsley considered letting her mother learn for herself that Rowena wasn’t the person to force into doing anything. Yet, it would humiliate the duchess to stand unprepared before the marquess and Ainsley could not be a part of making her look a fool.

“Lady Ainsley, we need to get you ready for your evening.” Her maid waited in the doorway of Ainsley’s room.

“Mary, what will I say when I meet the marquess?” She hugged the older woman.

Mary squeezed her tight and Ainsley felt a wonderful, safe sensation. She liked to think of it as the loving replacement for what her mother should have provided. The duchess never showed any of her children affection the way Ainsley believed mothers should.

“Oh dear child, always be polite. Speak your mind if it doesn’t go against the grain too much. You’ll impress the marquess by being you.” Mary took her arm and led her to the dressing screen.

Ainsley didn’t hide behind it, since they were alone. But once she removed her day dress, she tossed it on the chair that sat behind the lace-curtained panels.

"Your mother wishes you to wear the lavender gown. She wants both her daughters to appear a fitting addition to the Rawlington household."

"You know about the wedding then?" Ainsley held her arms out to allow Mary access to the ribbon around the bodice.

"I've been sworn to silence regarding that matter, m'lady." She tugged the capped sleeves to puff them. "But yes, I know," she whispered in a secretive hush, glancing at the door.

Ainsley ignored Mary's dramatics and smoothed a hand over the dress as she moved closer to the cheval glass. She twirled once, loving the flow of the soft muslin brushing her bare legs. The mirrored image pleased her with its reflection of a young, confident lady. She knew different and the illusion couldn't bolster her courage enough for the night.

"I simply love this gown," she bubbled with nervous excitement.

"One would think you're the one the marquess comes to marry." Mary laughed.

"Don't even suggest such a thing. The poor man would die of embarrassment to have me on his arm."

"Nonsense, m'lady. Any man would love your grace and beauty."

"But not my shyness."

"Oh poppycock. A little thing such as a quiet, well-mannered lady never ran off any man."

"What is Rowena supposed to wear?" Ainsley tilted her head, giving Mary full command of her hair.

"Your mother has bought her the most exquisite gown. She'll make a beautiful bri... She'll look lovely." Mary brushed Ainsley's hair, arranging it into one coil at the back and to the side of her head. "You'll be a treasure on some man's arm one day as well, dear child."

The hours swept by swiftly to the moment of the marquess's arrival. When Ainsley checked on Rowena, she sadly discovered her sister really had left. She didn't want to believe it, but then Rowena was often selfish and she'd not care to do the right thing.

Ainsley had waited until the last possible moment before going to her mother and once she stood at her mother's door, trepidation made her hesitate.

"Breathe," she told herself and raised her small, tight fist to tap on the heavy oak. Spreading her fingers, she looked at them tremble, and shook her hand vigorously. "It's not my fault," she muttered, rapping on the door firmly.

The door creaked open six inches, no more, no less, and she stepped back sheepishly as Mavis, the lady's maid tending her mother, gave her a disgruntled, hard stare. What Ainsley thought of the woman could never be construed as pleasant. Mavis had the behavior of an ugly dog.

"What is it?" Mavis growled in her usual deep tone.

Ainsley shivered. It wasn't right to be frightened of the woman, and still, she felt her knees knocking.

"Your mother is busy getting ready and we are running late."

"I need to speak to Her Grace, it's important." She took another deep breath and swallowed the dry lump in her throat.

"Not now." Mavis's crooked, old fingers curled around the door to close it.

"It's imperative."

Often, she backed away from outright opposition. She had perfected the words *pardon me*. This day was different and the reason important, so she pushed through the doorway.

"Your Grace, I need a word please." She curtsied. "Would you ask Mavis to leave? I must talk to you...privately."

"Not now, Ainsley. Lord Dunsmore will be here any minute and I have yet to see if Rowena is ready." The duchess dusted her face with a powder puff and each swipe paled her more.

"I wouldn't ask if it wasn't urgent."

"Pish posh. What in heaven's name could you have so significant to say at this late hour? If you're not satisfied with your hair or gown, then change it. I've my own problems," she groaned, fussing with the rouge.

"Here, let me." Ainsley took a handkerchief and wiped off as much of the red smear as possible.

"Ainsley, your hands are shaking." Her mother glanced up at her face in the mirror. "You should really try the Dover's powder to calm your nerves."

"I'm fine and you should not use the medicine so frequently. I've heard people die from the abuse of opium."

"I only use a pinch when Rowena has her tantrums."

"Mother, please. I wish to... Mavis, please leave." Ainsley didn't look at the woman as she gave the command abruptly. She dropped her gaze apologetically to her mother.

"Go on, Mavis," the duchess commanded. "Check on Rowena and come straight back."

Ainsley waited until the door closed. She doubted the woman knew how to gossip, yet felt it a private matter the servant need not be privy to. Mavis left, but Ainsley didn't breathe any easier.

"Ainsley, you have one second to tell me what is more important than the Marquess of Dunsmore's arrival." She twisted on her vanity stool.

"Rowena has left the house, Mother. She has run off to marry her baron."

"She wouldn't!" The duchess shot up out of her chair and headed for the door. "That no-good, spiteful child. I will disown her."

Ainsley shuddered. If her mother could burst the place into flames, it would be cooler than her rage exploding. The duchess aimed for Rowena's room and Ainsley headed for safer quarters. She hurried down the hall toward the stairs. She would hide in an empty room until the storm passed. Lord Dunsmore would come, be given the information and then he would leave. Their family would once again be the talk of the ton, like a curse was set upon them. Her mother would never return to English society.

In a disorganized frenzy, the servants scattered about the foyer like ants on a field of white marble. A footman opened the door and Ainsley froze in place three steps from the bottom of the staircase. She stared

wide-eyed with alarm as a man in a dark brown tailcoat crossed the threshold. The duchess wasn't there to greet the Marquess of Dunsmore and Ainsley couldn't do it.

"Thank you." The Marquess handed his beaver top hat and russet leather gloves to a servant.

Dressed plainly, in high-waisted, close-fitting tan pantaloons with black, square-topped boots, the marquess had an imposing stance. The white shirt with a turned-up collar accented his dark, attractive features.

Lord Dunsmore's gaze lifted.

Rowena was mad for not wanting to have at least looked at her betrothed.

Chapter Two

Desmond brushed off his sleeves, straightened the cream silk cravat and raked a hand through his hat-ravaged hair. He looked up, not for the reason that he had finished his perfunctory grooming, but because he sensed someone watching him.

A halo glowed above the head of a young lady standing on the staircase. Her stillness reminded him of a startled animal. If the beautiful vision on the riser was his intended bride, he'd be a blessed man. However, he feared there might be no way to start his heart again if the angel belonged to another.

"M'lord?" A servant spoke and Desmond raised a hand to silence him.

He waited for the young lady to speak. Only the longer he stared, the less likely it seemed she'd make any noise. Not a sound stirred. Not even a rasp of air to say she was real. He usually got some response from women, even if it was a sigh. Then he witnessed the truest form of innocence. Shyness washed over her face in a red blush and he watched with stunned bemusement as the lovely young lady hurried down the remaining steps.

"Good evening. I'm Lord...Dunsmore." His declaration faded.

Her flight did not end with him. It began.

She moved like a gazelle, and in seconds, she disappeared from sight. He looked to the servant with question, yet shook his head, indicating the man need not give a response. Desmond had no wish to pry.

"My Lord Dunsmore, forgive my delay." The duchess descended on him. "Servants are not what they used to be and I'm afraid the French are far worse than our English ones."

"Your Grace." Desmond bowed. "You do me an honor to have me in your lovely home."

"Thank you, my lord. We shall conduct our conversation in the drawing room."

He followed her slow walk toward the doorway. "I fear I have given a fright to a member of your family."

While the girl intrigued him, he didn't think he'd like one who might be daft. However, bound by honor, he would not shirk his responsibility even if he was being tricked into marrying a mute.

Besides, he hadn't come for a bride, but a wife with the Delacorte name.

"About the arrangement I had with your grandfather, the duke, there is a slight problem," the duchess commented nervously.

"Oh?" Desmond stopped walking. "What sort of problem?"

"This is just dreadful to have to tell you, but my daughter, Lady Delacorte..." She paused, wringing her hands together. "She's burdened with a malady preventing her from...ah...wedding you."

Warily, he eyed the woman's uneasiness.

"Preventing her," he repeated. "If you mean because she can't speak, I assure you the condition of silence would be no problem."

"Oh, heavens no, I'm not talking about my younger daughter. I know this is a terrible inconvenience. There's no way to express how upsetting this has been for me, but Lady Delacorte ran off to marry a baron, a Frenchman, no less. I had no way to stop it. I hope you can forgive this insult to your good name."

"This is more than an inconvenience, Your Grace. This is a direct affront to the duke. Announcements that I am marrying the Lady Delacorte are being made in England as we speak."

Desmond glanced at the empty path the young lady had taken into the drawing room.

"The girl I saw who fled my presence. You said she is a daughter. Is she of marrying age?"

“Why yes, yes she is. Ainsley is beyond that age. She’s twenty-one, and oh my lord, what a wonderful solution!” She clapped her hands together. “She’d be much more to your liking. Lady Delacorte has always been a troublesome child. She would not have been right for you at all as your wife. Lady Ainsley is quiet, reserved and quite intelligent.”

“Except she can’t talk.”

“On the contrary, you have it all wrong. Lady Ainsley has no trouble speaking when she wishes to. She’s merely shy. Poor child simply puts a mother at her wits’ end with her silence, but you did say silence would not be a problem.”

“Shall we conclude our deal then?” He waved a hand for her to go into the drawing room before him.

The duchess sat in a chair and he took a place on the settee.

“Pierre, please bring Lord Dunsmore and myself a cognac. Also, some of those delightful little cakes, what are they called again?” While the duchess conversed with the servant about wine and petit fours, Desmond felt a chill from watchful eyes and remembered the girl.

Discreetly turning his head, he spotted the young lady on the opposite side of the open door. She stood absolutely still, petrified no doubt, by the plot against her. He took pity on her as she stared at him with a glassy, dazed expression. Her bright blue eyes, wide and beautiful, locked on his and he felt compelled to help her. The gorgeous creature and her radiant gaze made his body harden and ache in anticipation of their wedding night.

Desmond turned back to the duchess so as not to draw attention to Lady Ainsley. But the duchess was fretting over the lack of petit fours while he cared nothing about eating.

His gaze returned to Lady Ainsley. He offered her a smile and a solution. Desperately frightened, she needed a moment to compose herself before he requested to speak to her.

“That is a lovely vase, Greek I believe.” Desmond pointed to the urn behind the duchess making her turn her head away.

Discreetly, he waved a hand at Lady Ainsley to flee.

"I must say I wasn't aware that it was." She glanced over her shoulder for a second, then turned back to him. "I'm simply at a loss about designs other than those popular in England."

He looked at the doorway hoping the lady's petrified state had not fastened her to the wall as an ornament.

She was gone.

Would this daughter flee the house as well? With one Delacorte lady running out on the marriage contract, how could he be sure this one wouldn't do the same?

"There you are, Mavis." The duchess rose from her chair. "Find Lady Ainsley and bring her immediately."

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Tell me about Lady Ainsley," Desmond prompted the duchess. "She isn't mad or sickly? You did say she wasn't mute."

With a marriage strictly of convenience, it shouldn't have mattered.

"Ainsley is in perfect health. She is bright, energetic and loyal."

While any wife he had might stay locked in her room forever, he didn't want to imagine Lady Ainsley being aloof. Unlike associates and friends, he, too, would be loyal. A mistress took what she could get. A wife deserved his courtesy instead of having him gallivant about the ton like some kind of immoral rake. As much as he conspired to wed the girl for power and position, he had honor.

"And this silence she keeps? A vigil of some sort?" He continued his inquiry while waiting for the girl to appear.

"Ainsley suffers shyness when speaking to strangers, m'lord. She prefers to cut herself off from society instead of embracing the gaiety of our culture. Though, I assure you, I see this as a good quality in the wife of a duke. You would have no need to worry about her stepping beyond the bounds of protocol. She is ever the dutiful child and should you be blessed with heirs, my daughter possesses a great affection for children."

Children. He had not considered children. All he planned, or his grandfather plotted, was for him to marry a distant cousin of Prince George.

Lady Ainsley Delacorte, a relation to the Crown, and as far removed as one could get, still provided him that link. They would get invitations to social affairs and he'd be in a better position to restore pride to his family.

"So this shyness is only with strangers?" He did not intend to be a stranger to the lady's bed.

"She comes by the affliction quite unnaturally. When young, Ainsley was ever the talkative child, but withdrew after her father died. He spoiled the girl. I suppose this is her retribution against... Well, I don't exactly know what it's against. She simply refuses to entertain the idea of socializing with her peers. She does have a fine voice, m'lord. With a gentle heart and a bit of kindness, she'll come around. It will not hurt in the least for her to have such an attractive, young husband either." The duchess laughed.

"Nor a title and money, I daresay." He lifted a brow.

The duchess cleared her throat. At that same instant, the servant brought in a tray with their drinks.

"Your timing is impeccable, Pierre." She took her glass, as did Desmond. "Shall we toast, m'lord, to your nuptials and good health?"

Desmond lifted his glass. "To Lady Ainsley."

The duchess gave a bob of her head and took a generous sip of cognac. English women did not partake of liquor with such openness. The French had always been more liberal and Desmond recognized it as a flaw. The duchess was well suited to her new life in France and he could only speculate why she wished to return to England.

With his father's association closely tied to the duchess's husband, there was little hope of Desmond winning the favor of the Crown by himself. Both men had been sots and if not for their deaths, both the Rawlingtons and the Delacortes would be considered the dregs of society.

"Where is that girl?" the duchess muttered. She took another nervous sip from her crystal goblet.

"I would assume preparing to meet me. I do forgive her delay as this is, no doubt, a surprise summons."

"Of course, yes of course, m'lord. It's very astute of you to know of a lady's..." Her words stopped.

Desmond's gaze followed the duchess's to the doorway. Upon sight of the lovely lady, he rose from the uncomfortable settee.

"Your Grace." Lady Ainsley barely spoke above a sweet whisper.

"There you are, Ainsley." The duchess wagged a hand. "Come in and meet the Marquess of Dunsmore."

Her demanding tone forced Lady Ainsley to step back. Desmond's instincts were to stop her from bolting. Instead, Lady Ainsley took three short, brisk steps toward him.

"May I present my daughter," the duchess said. "Lady Ainsley Delacorte."

"M'lady, it is a pleasure." He bowed.

"Lady Ainsley, I introduce to you the Marquess of Dunsmore."

She curtsied with the unhurried grace of a swan. Then, as if a gentle breeze guided her movements, she rose. She was the most splendid creature to look upon and he forgot his prior lack of excitement about taking a wife. When she kept her head down, beyond what was required, his chest tightened with sympathy.

He took her hand, lifted it and bowed slightly over the delicate fingers.

"It is my pleasure, m'lady." Never taking his gaze off her, he kissed the velvety skin of her knuckles.

Inappropriate as it may be, he dragged his lips over her flesh with a wet, warm glide, as if it were her mouth he teased. He swept his tongue up between her middle and forefinger, tickling her palm. Nipping at her knuckle just before his rise ended the lingering kiss was a bold move when he had already witnessed her bashfulness.

Lady Ainsley remained frozen to his advances. He risked scaring her off, and yet, she had no say in the matter of her marriage. Not when the duchess was adamant about the arrangement.

Chapter Three

Ainsley wanted to flee, but only because the outrageous conduct of the marquess flushed her skin with titillating gooseflesh. His action gave her cause to run and hide. She should have run the moment her hand came free of Lord Dunsmore's possessive hold. Except her legs wobbled as if she stood on a rocking chair. Her body swayed. She had never fainted in her life, but well imagined doing so now. Sensations hit her in waves, making her too weak to think. The moment his lips met her hand, she ached with incredible clarity from her taut nipples to her wet thighs. She had a desire to rub both and a wicked idea sprang to mind, heating her cheeks.

She fought the urge to look at him, but lost, and her gaze disobediently ventured to his. The green pools twinkled with merriment. She should have felt humiliated by the way he abandoned etiquette, however that required her brain to function properly.

The boldness of his soft, moist lips left her mesmerized. When he had sucked at her skin with a second, much firmer kiss, she was lost to the moment. She had watched his lips pull from her quivering flesh, leaving an intense warmth to travel like liquid lightning through her veins.

He smiled and it sent her gaze away. She shifted her stare from him to her mother. The duchess said nothing about what transpired and Ainsley realized her mother hadn't seen.

Ainsley moved across the room to kiss her mother's cheek. She should have torn her stare from the spellbinding hold of the dashing marquess, but he wouldn't let her. He spoke to her through his brilliant green irises and she waited for his next words.

Ainsley's thoughts whirled with a strange exhilaration. Hot and terribly nervous, she studied the man who had helped her escape the room so her mother would not see her display of bashfulness. The duchess hated the way she ducked into doorways and wrapped herself behind draperies. She hated it herself. Unfortunately, she didn't know how to break years of shy flight.

Lord Dunsmore and his compassion deserved a kindness in return. Therefore, unlike her sister, she'd accept the forthcoming arrangement. Besides, she found herself utterly fascinated by the marquess's sensitivity and chivalry. Most people tended to jest about her proclivity for the shadowed corners. He had recognized right away the situation had distressed her and he chose to help her get out of the room.

"Your Grace, if I might have your permission to escort Lady Ainsley on a stroll in your gardens, I think the news might be given easier by me."

With his suggestion, Lord Dunsmore gave a controlling look to the duchess. Ainsley knew he'd get his way. Her mother liked the type of man who dominated everyone around them. Her mother also wanted this marriage arrangement finalized between the Rawlingtons and the Delacortes. To obtain that goal, all protocol would be broken.

"Why of course, Lord Dunsmore, of course." The duchess smiled with a brilliant, triumphant pleasure and nodded.

"M'lady, shall we?" He lifted his arm for Ainsley to take.

"I—" The one syllable word squeezed to a halt. Nerves just wouldn't let her speak.

Ainsley placed her hand on his forearm. He escorted her out of the drawing room and into the foyer where servants waited. It actually made her feel better when her mother chose to stay behind.

"It's a chilly night," Lord Dunsmore said. "We should see to something for your arms."

He motioned to a servant while she absorbed his masculine strength. She threw back her shoulders to display some bravery. Everything in her heart rushed with a yearning to know him.

To a servant in the foyer the marquess ordered, "Bring the lady's wrap." He turned to face her. "Hopefully, they will fetch a heavy pelisse, because I do believe you are in need of something a little more tolerant of your hands."

Ainsley hadn't realized how she crumpled the front of her dress in her fists. Her lovely lavender gown now had wrinkles and she smoothed over them quickly, embarrassed to the point her face burned with a blush.

The servant brought her a white lace shawl. The night did not have the kind of chill requiring a coat. Lord Dunsmore said nothing as he took it. He waved everyone away and she stood alone with him in the foyer. With care and gentleness, he laid the wrap around her shoulders. She held still as his breath touched her cheek. His fingers feathered her neck lifting the coil of her hair from her shoulder. She slid the shawl up, hating that his hand moved away.

"Your beauty is unmatched by even the fragrance you wear," he whispered close to her ear. "Though, I hope to have it cling to my senses, even when you're not around, reminding me of your magnificence."

He gripped her shoulders lightly and Ainsley shivered with apprehension. She had yet to speak more than a few words and he made it almost impossible for her to gather enough wits to carry on a conversation.

"Ready, m'lady?" He held the large brass door handle.

Ainsley attempted to shake her head. But when his arm came up for her to take, the next thing she knew her fingers were on his sleeve. On a cloud of excitement, she floated out the massive doorway. She smiled at the overwhelming thrill she got from knowing she didn't want to go into hiding. It did of course help that they were alone. Something about not humiliating herself in front of others aided her daring.

"It's a lovely night, is it not?" Lord Dunsmore commented. "The moon and stars seem dazzling tonight and I think it is the sparkle in your eyes that adds to the scene."

His words, more than his silence, made her uneasy.

"You needn't pay court to me," she boldly informed him.

“No?” He stopped at the base of the stone steps.

They were almost eye level and Ainsley felt an uplifting moment of courage. She didn’t have to look up to him and he didn’t look down to her.

“I do understand why you brought me out here.”

“You think you do, but I assure you, not even I know exactly why.”

Ainsley gulped. Her courage faltered. “My mother can be somewhat overbearing and...”

“That’s not the reason.” His hand swept the outside of her thigh and rested at her hip.

It took her breath away, considering what it would feel like to kiss him.

“You came for my sister.” She rushed to say anything that would prevent her from thinking about his touch.

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry for her bad behavior. It was extremely selfish and rude of her to have run off as she did.”

“Yes, I suppose it was a breach in good conduct.”

“My mother had no idea.”

“So she told me.” His hand slid up her side.

“She’s dreadfully sorry, you know.”

“Who? Your sister or the duchess?”

“Oh both, naturally. Rowena was just—”

“Interested in a different man for a husband.” He completed her sentence.

“Yes.”

“And the duchess seems to have good cause to be in a fair snit over the matter.” His green eyes twinkled from the moonlight, but they were serious, unamused by the matter with her sister.

Ainsley had to look away. Her gaze dropped to his shoulder as she continued to make apologies for Rowena.

"My sister fell in love and she saw it as her destiny. I cannot fault her for wanting to be happy."

"Do you not want the same?" He touched her cheek and she froze.

"No...yes, but I...m'lord..."

"What?" He lightly stroked her skin.

"I'm not someone whom you should marry to replace my sister. You'd be constantly embarrassed to have me in your household," she blurted out.

"You do yourself too much of a disservice, m'lady." His fingers caressed the curve of her neck making it hard to think.

She hoped for a reprieve from the madness of wishing to kiss him, except he made her want it more.

"Any man would see you as a treasure to have in his house and his bed."

Ainsley gasped with shock at his statement. She could let innuendos slip by, but flat-out boldness, never.

"You're too forward, m'lord. You are not yet my husband, and even so, to speak of such...such intimacy is not proper."

"You'll get used to it, m'lady." He cupped her face and brushed the coarse pad of his thumb under her eye.

She hadn't realized a tear had escaped until he massaged the cool wetness into her inflamed cheek. She blinked and he wiped at another. Unable to hold her eyes open to the caress, she lowered her lashes.

"You're young, sheltered and a vision no man would ignore." His hot breath continued to stroke her skin during his inspection.

"I'm an insignificant person in your life."

She leaned into his fingers that skirted her hairline in tender perusal.

It seemed somewhat appropriate for him to inspect the goods her mother sold him before it was too late to rescind the deal. A horse, a cow, a wife, she would be nothing more than chattel for his appearance in society. Little did he know, his bargain would fall short where she was concerned.

"Your worth is much more than you'll ever know. Without needing to see the Lady Delacorte, I believe I have the more desirable sister before me."

"You don't know me."

"It is something heartfelt."

The longer he talked, the more his breath swept over her face, the deeper he drew her into a fantasy. Not flinching when his fingers skated down her neck to her collarbone, she absorbed his caress the way one relishes a good dream.

"So very lovely," he whispered.

He dragged the back of his knuckles over her breast. The tease puckered her nipple until she felt the pointed ache travel deep. He continued to abrade the beaded nipple with a persistent graze of his finger going up and then down.

Finally, she opened her eyes.

"You are a very desirable woman, m'lady. Have no concern on that matter."

She didn't need him to repeat his earlier statement. He had her trapped into wanting more of his touch, yet the feelings he elicited seduced her into remaining quiet.

"Come." He coaxed with a hand to her elbow. "I should like our conversation to have fewer eyes."

Ainsley looked at the window. Mortified by her mother's watchful gaze, she willingly let Lord Dunsmore lead her away to the gardens. They walked across the cobblestone drive along the rim of the green courtyard. Into the arched entrance of the rose garden, he went first, tugging her gently to follow. Ainsley loved the scent as she passed through the pink rose-covered trellis.

"Let's sit." He pointed to a bench.

She studied the darkest area with the small, lonely bench. Her favorite place because it was well shadowed from view during the day.

Now it appeared too secluded. Trepidation gripped her. His insistence could not be overlooked.

“First, I don’t want you to be sorry for what your sister did. Everyone has limits to self-sacrifice. I’ll not hold your sister to blame for hers. Second, I came to wed a Delacorte and you are such.”

Ainsley found everything about the marquess intriguing.

“I would be most displeased if a marriage didn’t take place,” he continued, stroking her hand. “First, because I find you perfect for my needs, and second, it would create problems. If I could release you from the obligation, I would, but I cannot.”

“I understand, m’lord.”

“What I’d like to hear is that you’re not planning to run off. Or worse, despise me for the duration of our marriage. Forever is a very long time.”

“I’d never hate you for anything.” The words rushed out and she cringed inside. Nothing was guaranteed in life.

His green eyes darkened as if he was afraid to believe her words. If they had known each other better, he’d see she didn’t have it in her to loathe anyone, no matter their shortcomings. The exception was Mavis.

“That’s nice to hear.” He reached up and plucked a rose petal from her hair. “Then you are not in love with someone, a Frenchman perhaps, who has turned your English eyes from the country to which you belong.”

“No, there is...there has never been anyone.”

His dark brow arched with disbelief.

“There is no one your heart has ever yearned to have?” He rubbed a finger across her bottom lip.

“No, m’lord.”

Ainsley had never harbored special feelings for anyone and yet, her attraction for the marquess was strong. Whether fondness or fear, something in her let him scrutinize her.

“How opposed are you to this marriage?” His fingers lingered on her mouth.

Ainsley wanted to say very, but how many men of good quality would want her? Her mind ran amuck with the horrors of who her mother would have eventually married her off to.

"I'm not like my sister. I do as Her Grace directs. If it is her wish for me to marry you, I will."

His inspection ventured to her teeth and he drew down her bottom lip, extracting the juices. He painted the saliva around the rim of her mouth.

"Why do you examine me so?"

"Because my imagination has the better of me and I dream of our wedding night, in our bed."

Ainsley shot to her feet in flustered fright. He had other ideas and his hands latched onto her hips. With the swiftness of a hawk, he had her back and perched on his knee.

"What's wrong, m'lady? Am I too forward?"

"Gentlemen do not speak of such things to a lady."

"Would you not like to know something about me? Or is it your preference to come into this marriage blindly?"

"It's just that gentlemen do not—" Sequestered in the far recesses of the garden, it would be her fault if he took advantage.

"I never professed to be a gentleman, my dear. I'm a marquess. However, it does not change the needs I have. Just as you are a lady and you cannot hide the ache you feel between your legs."

Ainsley turned her head from his voice in her ear. It left her neck exposed. While he shouldn't know anything about the way her insides quivered, she took a small delight at the attention he gave her neck.

"Tell me, Ainsley, do you not want to have a preview of the nights to come?"

She enjoyed the way his breath heated the pulse in her neck, but shook her head.

"Are you sure?" He kissed her shoulder.

She wasn't. As his stroke made more reasons for her to say yes, her mind preferred facts.

"I'm afraid I don't understand, m'lord."

"I want you." He nipped at her earlobe.

He pressed his warm lips to the beating skin beneath her jaw and sucked against her rapid pulse. He raked her dress over the rim of her shoulder, drawing it down. He dipped below the border of her bodice and lightly touched her nipple.

From that point onward, Ainsley didn't care if she ever understood.

Chapter Four

Desmond tried to argue against the reasons for his rakish behavior, but Ainsley gave him little help. She enchanted him when he believed no woman had the power. His busy life, demanding his attention all the time, suddenly seemed less important.

“Tell me to stop.” He kissed against the velvet of her neck.

“Stop,” she repeated without conviction.

Her hand covered his and squeezed the very fingers he had over her breast. He twisted her slightly and laid her back in the niche of his arm. The spiked points of her breasts rose for him to taste with a lick of his tongue. Like a cherry, topping a rich dessert, he took the burnished bead of her pink nipple into his hungry mouth. He savored the softness of her skin. The delicacy of her plump breasts, pliant and willing, molded to his palm.

“M’lord.” Her breathless moan encouraged him.

If it was not for the hindrance of clothes, his throbbing cock would have felt the silk of her hip rub him.

Desmond sipped his way up to her collarbone. Her head hung in the cup of his hand and her small whimpers tore at his conscience. Whores, mistresses and ladies of Madame LeClaire’s establishment were fitting for his disgraceful behavior. His bride was not. Carefully he lifted her upright and fixed her clothing.

With one finger, he touched her mouth. She had to assume him the devil to treat her so discourteously.

“M’lady.” His voice was hoarse with emotion. “We leave for England within the hour.”

“But, the wedding? How can it be arranged that quickly?”

“I’ve handled all those preparations.”

He held her hips for one lingering moment, engrossed by the curve of her trim waist. Anywhere else besides the garden in her small yard and he might have ravished the lady of all virtue. Ainsley however, was special and he liked to think he had some decency in him. His errant erection, fighting to be released, protested as he guided her off his lap. When he finally gave her leave to run, she stood straight and steady. He examined her clothes for traces of his indiscretion. She appeared no more rumpled than when he had brought her outside.

“You’ll not say anything, will you?” she asked quietly.

Her chin tipped down a little with each breath she took.

“I assure you, m’lady, nothing we ever share will be spoken of by me.” He offered his arm.

Her precious hesitancy ended with her fingers wrapped in the crook of his elbow. Such innocence overwhelmed him with an ache in his heart.

Desmond took Ainsley in the house. He sent her away for two reasons, to get her maid to pack and to allow her time to recover from his rakish behavior.

He remained at the base of the stairs watching her ascend as if she were an angel leaving him for heaven. The soft tap of her shoes on the wood stairs distanced her.

On a landing above, she glanced down. Her face had a blank expression, a sad one he imagined, and yet her blue eyes glowed in a way that made him think of how a woman appeared in the aftermath of an orgasm.

She disappeared before he could decide if she had experienced such a sensation under his kiss.

“Lord Dunsmore.” The duchess appeared from the drawing room. “If my daughter has run off it’s only because of her shyness.”

“I find Lady Ainsley a delight and a very suitable bride. I’ve sent her upstairs to prepare for our journey.”

“Oh, well this is most remarkable.”

“Remarkable, Your Grace? Is there something else I should know about your daughter?”

“Heavens, no. I’m surprised, that’s all. She’s such a timid creature.”

“Prone to run away?”

“Not like her sister, but Ainsley tends to hide from confrontation of any sort.”

“That’s a shame. Maybe someone should check on her?”

The duchess glanced up the stairs. “She’ll be fine. Tonight we’ll get a good rest and in the morning we shall go to the church and have the ceremony.”

“About the wedding.” Desmond tried not to pace or appear nervous. “I wish to change the location.”

“Any church you say will be acceptable. I assure you, Ainsley is not a religious child and she—”

“England,” he interrupted. “I wish the marriage to take place in England, instead of here in France.”

“Oh, I could not possibly travel this early in the season.”

“Then you wish to dissolve our arrangement?” He couldn’t let her, but she wouldn’t know that.

“Absolutely not. Just because I’m unable to travel doesn’t mean Lady Ainsley needs to miss this most opportune... I mean, of course, this most satisfactory understanding we’ve come to. I think it a splendid idea to have the wedding performed in our own country. Very fitting indeed and then there will be no confusion about the legalities of such a union.”

“I’m glad to see you and I think alike, Your Grace.”

Desmond knew the reason the Delacortes left England. The Duke of Delacorte died a poor man. His drinking disgraced the name and the duchess. To save face, she hid, not that unlike her daughter.

“Then you see no reason I shouldn’t take the Lady Ainsley straight away tonight? We can pave the road for your return with our nuptials.”

"The sooner the better for us all." She wound her arm around his. "Tell me, the duke is well?"

"My grandfather is in very good health. He is especially looking forward to your return to England."

Her blue eyes grew brighter and he imagined she had marriage plans of her own in mind with his widowed grandfather, the duke, regardless that she no longer had any wealth.

* * *

The knock at her door stopped Ainsley from packing.

"Yes?" She opened the door.

"I wish to speak you." Lord Dunsmore made a bold, unheard of entrance into her private room.

The tingling from earlier hadn't completely gone away and a new rush of anxiety attacked. Ainsley snatched at the front of her already wrinkled dress. She gripped the cloth tight, cutting the circulation off to her fingertips, and watched Lord Dunsmore. The door whooshed as he closed it. The arrogance, the insolence and the exquisite daring sung like a song to her heart. The vibration radiated through her limbs.

"My mother will—"

"Never know."

"Someone must have seen you come upstairs."

"I was careful." He paused to glance around her room. "Besides, your mother is in favor of this marriage between us."

"She's excited by the thought of returning to England and she'd do anything to take up residency there, even if it means living in your home."

"There you have it. She'd not spoil her plans because I impulsively came in here."

"Maybe not, but—"

Lord Dunsmore captured her chin in his palm. His head lowered toward her and she stared into his eyes, finding the devilish twinkle made her happy.

His mouth sealed over hers and when he pushed his tongue, parting her lips, she accepted him.

“You are delicious.” He bit gently at her lower lip and tugged.

Ainsley collapsed into his embrace and his tender restraint held her up. She inhaled to catch air and tasted him. His tongue, his teeth and his breath were laced with cognac. Liquor could do no greater harm to her senses than his kiss.

Inebriated by ardor, Ainsley enjoyed the way his tight hold crushed her breasts against his chest. Her nipples throbbed against the heat burning through his clothes. The friction of his kiss made her lips tingle and her heart soar with desire. Strangely, his mouth on hers seemed more personal than when he had his lips on her breasts.

“You’re an exquisite creature.” His voice came to her like something from a dream. “Kiss me back.”

Ainsley’s shyness intensified with her feeling of inadequacy and she withdrew. Their lips parted and she attempted to turn her head away, but he stopped her.

“Kiss me,” Lord Dunsmore repeated.

She curled her lips inward.

He touched her mouth gently, encouragingly. His words beckoned and his persistence enticed. She slid her hands up his arms. The muscles stopped her, and for an odd reason, she squeezed the firm biceps, testing the hardness, not understanding why he didn’t use his strength against her resistance.

“Kiss me with your sweet lips and your inviting tongue.”

“I don’t know how.”

The corner of his mouth cocked up on one side. As if she weren’t already apprehensive from his actions, his amused grin made her more so.

A knock at the door separated them.

"Come in." Ainsley answered too quickly.

She avoided looking at the marquess as the door opened.

"I'll wait for you downstairs." Lord Dunsmore abruptly left her room.

Ainsley watched him pass Mary with a stiff gait, as if something was wrong with the lower half of his body. From outside the door, he gave her a chance to see how he desired her when she brazenly glanced from his face to the front of his trousers. A tremor rattled her limbs and by the time her knees buckled, Mary had shut the door.

"M'lady?" Mary took her arm and guided her to the satin stool at her dressing table. "You're as pale as new snow."

"Am I?" She turned and studied her reflection in the mirror.

"All but for the glow in your cheeks. Was the handsome devil too forward? Those sort usually are."

Ainsley observed the reddish tint—bright and scorching hot. It reminded her of how her mother looked with rouge.

"I've heard the details. Now, tell me what you think of the outcome of the news." Mary puffed the flattened sleeves on her gown again. "Your sister should be ashamed of putting you through such an ordeal."

Mary continued questioning, without waiting for answers.

Ainsley stared ahead at herself. She seemed different, awakened by Lord Dunsmore's passion. Crossing her arms, she capped her shoulders with her palms, flattening the sleeves. The tremors continued to vibrate in all parts of her body. Sparks of heat triggered a gush of wetness between her legs. She didn't move until the little vibrations stopped.

Reality set in. She might handle being alone with Lord Dunsmore in an empty room, maybe enjoy it more than she ever savored anything. But in public, she would embarrass him.

"Mary, what will I do, what will I say to his family? They'll despise me. They'll laugh and make comments that I'll hear. He'll regret his decision and hate me."

"Nonsense. You'll make a lovely addition to the Rawlington family."

Ainsley covered her face. "I'm so frightened. I should do as Rowena did and run off until the marquess goes home. He'll find another to marry and mother will just have to learn to live with it."

Mary hugged her with one of the supportive, reassuring squeezes she gave freely. "You'll be fine."

"I'll just die if I humiliate him in front of his friends."

"You're talking silly. You'd never give anyone a reason to feel ashamed at having you around."

"Oh, I do too. Mother and Rowena always say I do," she sobbed. "I just can't go with the marquess and be known as his bashful lady."

Chapter Five

Desmond had the travel plans all arranged prior to his arrival to fetch his bride. A different lady than he initially considered made nothing about their journey different.

It was a mistake to go to Lady Ainsley's room and kiss her. Impulsive actions never failed to get him in trouble. However, she made him want to be around her and he had to satisfy the funny notion he had she would flee.

From the duchess's home to the wharf, he absconded with Lady Ainsley Delacorte as if he were a kidnapper. To keep things simple, he didn't speak to her. Until they were out of France, he'd not take any more risks that might make the lady run off just as her sister did.

The duchess sent along Lady Ainsley's maid, Mary, which made it easy to avoid conversation. However, dealing with one woman was all he could handle and once they reached the ship taking them to England, he sent Mary back to the duchess's residence.

Lady Ainsley made no protest, nor did he give her an opportunity to question the lack of a chaperone. On the ship, he put her in a cabin while he remained on deck until they arrived at port in England.

After hiring a coach to take them from London to his estate on the outskirts of the city, he breathed easier. Home was his sanctuary and the only place he felt at peace.

The coach bounced along the well-traveled roads, but speed was imperative and they traveled swiftly from the docks to the countryside.

It troubled Desmond that the duchess showed little concern about how her daughter might be treated. Her sole intent seemed clear—marry

Ainsley off to a titled man with money. He could not fault the duchess in that respect, yet the haste on her part was as great as his grandfather's when they made the arrangement.

Desmond pondered his choice of words before speaking. He'd said very little to the lady since their departure. When he opened his mouth, the words were gone. How could he tell the beautiful woman sitting opposite of him she was merely a pawn in a game? As he looked at her twisting her handkerchief, he decided she'd rather not know.

"It's a long ride." He smiled. "If you're tired, you could sit over here alongside me and sleep. I'd be sure not to let you slip off the seat."

The dark rings beneath her eyes showed she hadn't slept much on the voyage and he chastised himself for not trying to ease her mind about their relationship.

"I'm fine, m'lord." Her head remained submissively down.

"If I stay awake, you'll stay awake, is that the plan?" He gave a short laugh, liking Ainsley's personality and deeming himself lucky to have one good thing befall his miserable life.

He moved next to her. "There, I've made the choice easier for you."

"Really, I'm not tired."

"Do I make you nervous?" He picked up her hand and he felt her tremble.

"Oh no...well...yes, a little. I don't know what to say to you."

"You don't have to talk." He rubbed his thumb over the back of her glove. "But, maybe you have some questions about me?"

"No, m'lord."

"Hmmm, not curious at all? That's odd, because I find you a great mystery."

The coach jerked and he caught her before she fell forward. Her fingers latched onto the lapels of his jacket. Her face lifted and he pulled her close.

"I find you mystifying and I look forward to learning all there is about you, m'lady."

He slipped a hand behind her head and kissed her.

The devil would be proud of the way Desmond had made off with the delicate creature. Within a couple hours of meeting her, he had secured her hand in marriage, as well as traveled without her escort.

The duchess seemed more the fool than his grandfather believed. What woman of nobility sent her daughter off with a stranger, in the middle of the night, no less? Certainly, not one who cared about the lady's wellbeing.

"Will you believe I'll never hurt you?" he whispered, putting his forehead against hers.

She nodded with no apparent pause for thought. Adorably trusting, she had no end to her virtues.

Desmond couldn't stop himself from taking advantage.

He eased his hand beneath her cloak. It felt good to touch a woman who had no motives other than to do her duty. Lady Ainsley's fingers curled around a fold of his clothing and he pulled her in close to kiss. It didn't surprise him she did no more than hold her lips poised and puckered. It didn't matter she didn't participate. In time, he'd have the pleasure of teaching her about making love.

"M'lord," she gasped at an interval. "M'lord, please let me have a breath."

Desmond chuckled and eased back against the seat. "Why don't you rest completely?"

She sat rigid.

"Go on, put your head right here." He patted the side of his arm.

Surprisingly, she complied and silence filled the coach. For several seemingly endless hours, they rode across the countryside. He held Ainsley's hand and tried not to let the warmth of her body distract him from his thoughts about an important meeting he had that night. Sometimes, when his movements over her hand stopped, she clenched her fingers as if enticing him to continue. It drew his attention completely to her.

Desmond could have gone the entire night with nothing more on his mind than making her comfortable, except he had arranged a meeting en route from London. It was two, maybe three o'clock in the morning, when the coach stopped as he had planned.

Lady Ainsley sat up instantly. "Are we to your home?" She clutched her cloak with the same nervous habit she had with her dress. Her fretful expression unnerved him.

He considered moving on so she didn't learn too much about the unpleasant part of his life. Yet, he had to stop and settle business, even if it was unsafe to have her around the unsavory men he had to deal with that night.

"We're about a half hour away. I have a business matter to take care of first."

"In the middle of the night?"

"Yes, now stay in this coach." He reached beneath the seat and pulled out a box.

"Come on, Dunsmore, old chap, show yourself," a man with a gravelly voice shouted from outside.

"M'lord?" Lady Ainsley wedged herself into the corner as far from Desmond as possible.

"Just remain in here and we'll be on our way soon." He smiled and flipped open the box.

Her gasp stopped his heart. He didn't want to ignore her fear, except there was little time to reassure her. Especially since he didn't know just how events would play out.

"Be careful." She reached out to him and he held her hand just long enough to press a kiss in her palm.

"Of course." Desmond lifted the pistol and laid it on the seat next to her. "I have this for protection and I'm going to leave it here with you."

"Oh no, please." She looked at the weapon with the most horrified expression he'd ever seen.

"All you do is lift and—"

"I know how to shoot. If you feel I must use this, then you should take it with you."

"Dunsmore!" the man yelled again. "We haven't all night, man."

The fear in Ainsley's eyes made him worry that she might hurt herself. Taking it with him might also bring on more trouble than he needed. The man outside didn't know what Desmond planned.

Desmond opened the box and put the pistol back. He left the box on the seat in easy reach of Lady Ainsley or himself if the meeting got out of control.

"We'll both know where it is, all right? Stay quiet and remain out of sight."

She nodded.

Relieved that she comprehended the seriousness of his meeting, Desmond opened the door and hopped out. The glow from the lantern on the side of his coach created dancing shadows.

"I'll be five minutes," he told the driver he'd hired for the long trip.

Walking slowly, Desmond took in the surroundings. Movement caught his attention and he became aware of at least one other person in the background.

"Did you bring what you were supposed to?" The man was a gruff, repulsive creature who appeared hideous in the flicker of light over his face.

"Yes." Desmond put a hand in his jacket.

"You know, pretty white women bring a lot of money." He laughed, staring past him to the coach.

Desmond glanced too and should have known telling a woman to keep hidden was inviting her to look. He thought with Lady Ainsley's shy reserve, nothing would pry her from the corner. Yet, there she was, holding back the curtain and watching them.

"Them refined ladies are like gold," the fellow continued, straining his neck to see in the coach over Desmond's shoulder.

"So they are," Desmond agreed.

“Come, m’lord. Let’s get this transaction over with quickly.” The man waved his hand in the air with the letter Desmond had come to get. “You give me what I need and I give you this.”

“I want to see the letter first.” Desmond stared at the envelope.

There was no reason to believe it wasn’t authentic. The traitors needed the information passed on and they trusted the fellow before him to deliver it. The exchange of money was supposed to be in payment for the messenger service.

No one allowed Desmond a say, so he’d do things his own way.

“Not without seeing the money.” He scratched his jaw in nervous anticipation.

“Maybe you were misinformed,” Desmond growled low and grabbed the man by the throat. “Your services will no longer be required. Don’t let me see you ever again.”

Desmond shoved him away and tried to grab the letter.

“Get him,” the man shouted.

From the darkness emerged another man and Desmond swung. The first man came at him and his concern grew for Lady Ainsley’s safety if something happened to him. However, it was important he no longer let traitors have the upper hand and dictate orders to him. Every day, since learning that some of his family were disgruntled aristocrats, he had waited for a chance to stop them from their insane plot to return Napoleon to power. It made no sense other than their selfish concern with how they’d be stationed in a new government.

In the struggle, Desmond managed to get the letter the man had. It only took a second to get it wedged inside his waistcoat before he landed on the ground.

Ainsley figured to take one glance to be sure Lord Dunsmore didn’t go far. If he hadn’t conveyed his apprehension about his secret meeting by showing her his pistol, she would have been content to wait without spying.

From the moment the fight broke out between Lord Dunsmore and the other man, dreadful truths hit like rocks and bruised her. She had left home to marry a stranger. She was not his wife, nor his friend. A conversation about selling women had not put her at ease. The attack upon Lord Dunsmore frightened her back into the corner.

The coach suddenly bounced as if the weight of a horrendous storm crashed into it. She closed her eyes and listened to the ensuing struggle. A groan, a grunt and then an awful yelp pulled her hand up to the latch on the door. She cautiously pushed it down until a click released the catch. Inhaling deeply, she leaned out.

At first Ainsley didn't see anyone. Her gaze dropped to the ground where two figures wrestled in a flurry of limbs. Nearby, another figure shrouded in shadows lay sprawled on the night-dampened grass.

A blaze of fire glowed from the burning kerosene that had apparently spilled from one of the broken coach lanterns on the ground.

Ainsley stepped down and grabbed the coachman as he jumped from his perch on top the coach. "Help him," she demanded.

She lost her grip of his sleeve when he jerked his arm and ran off into the night.

Desmond continued to fight and Ainsley couldn't move. Recollections of her sister Rowena's praise that she was good at finding solutions moved her forward. Whatever wayward route her mind had gone, she concluded Lord Dunsmore had not met with the man to sell her. Whipping off her cloak, she tossed it over the man's head. With a steady grip and a firm will, she pulled back hard making the man fall away. Lord Dunsmore got to his knees.

Each time he punched the man, Ainsley flinched. She had never witnessed a fight. Society might have their share of people overindulging in drink and participating in the sport of gentlemen, but she wasn't subjected to brawls. No one fought in the fisticuff fashion like wharf ruffians. No one she knew until now.

Lord Dunsmore held the man up by his jacket and hit him several times in the face. It was a brutal, loathsome act and still, a wave of pride swept through Ainsley by the display of heroism.

“Get in the coach now,” he ordered.

“The coachman is gone.”

“I know.” He grabbed her cloak from the ground and threw it in her direction. “Get in.”

She whipped the cloak around her shoulders and swiftly did as he commanded. Climbing up, from the open coach door she looked back. After throwing the man aside, Lord Dunsmore rested on hands and knees, but soon wobbled and crashed to the ground.

Ainsley hopped out of the coach.

“Woman, get in that coach and stay put!” his demand came again as he attempted to get up.

“M’lord, you’re—”

“Now, Ainsley!” he snapped, rising to his feet.

Ainsley dashed inside and sat tight in the corner. She shivered frightfully hard and waited. Mindlessly, she busied herself with tying her cloak around her neck. Minutes stretched into a very long time, and she slid over and peered outside. She glimpsed the one man still rolling on the ground and the other lying quite still. A whimper caught in her throat as she considered Lord Dunsmore may have killed the man. New trepidations grew as she realized she’d soon be his wife.

Ainsley seriously debated running away, except the coach lurched forward, halting her contemplations of fleeing.

When they hit a rut, Ainsley fell forward to the floorboards.

“Ouch,” she grumbled.

Regaining her footing, she crawled back onto the seat. As they rocked and bounced over the rutted road, an awful thought swirled in her mind. Maybe Lord Dunsmore wasn’t on the coach. She pushed the curtain aside and leaned out the window opening to check. She couldn’t see anything.

For a half hour, the coach bumped along. Her fingers ached from hanging onto the frame. Suddenly, the coach slowed. The ride smoothed to a normal speed and she glanced outside. Through the mist, the sun began to break the fog, which continued to prevent her from seeing too far into the hazy horizon.

When the coach stopped completely, she waited a few minutes and heard nothing. Bravely she went forth to grip the door handle. Seizing it with a firm and resolute hold, she opened the door and climbed out.

“Lord Dunsmore?”

She didn’t see him above on the seat. Never having climbed to the driver’s seat of a coach before, she searched for a way to get up to him. She fumbled with the tie to her cloak. Once undone, she discarded it and put a foot onto a step. Pulling her weight up, she raised high enough to see Lord Dunsmore slumped against the opposite side of the seat.

“Lord Dunsmore!” She reached for the front of his bloodstained jacket.

“Home,” he hoarsely whispered. “Stay on this road.”

“But you’re hurt.” She lifted his shirt without thinking about the inappropriateness and looked at the blood on his skin.

“I’ll be fine, Lady Dunsmore.” His eyes were shut and his face wrinkled by obvious pain.

“No, I’m Lady Ainsley Delacorte, m’lord.”

“We’re married.” He clutched his side.

“Not yet, m’lord, remember?”

“Keep on this road. We’re close to home.”

She put a hand to his face wishing for him to take charge of his senses and yet feeling exhilarated by the fact he needed her.

“We must be married, m’lady.” He slid his hand behind her head and placed his forehead against hers. “It’s important that you say we are.”

“But we aren’t,” she repeated.

“Say your name to me.” He pushed her away. “Say I am Lady Dunsmore.”

She looked at him, confused.

“Say it,” he ordered.

“I’m...I’m...” She grabbed him as he slumped toward her. “I’m Lady Dunsmore,” her voice quavered in fear.

His insistence and anger alarmed her. His desperation propelled her to do as he bid.

“M’lord, we must get you help.”

With the reins, his blood-smeared hand dropped in her lap. A fear he would die racked her body. She grasped the thick leather lines and tried to think. Keep on the road, he had said. Snapping the leather straps the way she’d seen drivers do, she urged the horses to go and hoped they knew more than she did about staying on course.

The bouncing coach managed to hit every bump in the worn road. To think of Lord Dunsmore dying distressed her more than facing his family with his unconscious body.

Chapter Six

Desmond felt Ainsley sliding and bouncing to the edge of the seat and slid his hand farther over her lap to prevent her from falling off completely. A long coil of her silky hair touched his face as he leaned closer. She smelled good and if he had to die, at least he'd not be lying on the country road.

The voice in his head told him he wasn't going to die. Besides, he just couldn't abandon his bashful bride before she had the security of his name.

"The Dunsmore estate," she breathed, and he knew she saw the high arch of steel spanning the lane up to his home.

It was hard to mistake the place. Dunsmore had been masterfully scrolled in the intricate ironwork for over a hundred years. It was an elaborate and showy display of wealth that his great-grandfather had craftsmen create and erect. Tenants and guests were to be impressed. Desmond saw it as a banner of conceit. Nevertheless, the arch would remain untouched for as long as he was alive. He'd do nothing to change the way his ancestors displayed their success. As for how people perceived the family of Rawlington and their name, he hoped to make alterations very soon.

Desmond glanced up at the manor. Almost gloomy with the tall stone spires piercing the blue-black sky. He hoped Ainsley didn't see the place as her prison. It would be a sad thing to have a wife who felt her obligation and duty had trapped her.

"Don't forget your name." He squeezed her to him, and then leaned away so she could get help.

“Oh, m’lord, please don’t die.” She jerked on the reins and the coach jolted to a stop in front of the manor. “Help me!” she yelled. “Please hurry.”

Bertram, his manservant hurried their way. They had seen him in scrapes before.

“M’lady?” Bertram reached up to help her down.

“Lord Dunsmore has been hurt.”

“Are you all right, m’lady?”

“Yes.” She swatted away Bertram’s assistance once she was on the ground. “Help him.”

For the first time, Desmond witnessed the forceful charge in her voice. He saw a new side to his intended’s personality, a favorable strength in her character that added to his intrigue.

Bertram climbed up and they looked one another in the eye.

“M’lord, I see you’ve done more than fetch yourself a wife.” He took Desmond’s arm to help get him closer to the side.

“Apparently trouble likes to follow me, Bertram.” He put a hand on the man’s shoulder. “Call for assistance because I don’t reckon I can make the descent without busting some bones or crushing yours, my small friend.”

Bertram shouted and, within seconds, others joined him on the coach. It didn’t matter how careful they were, the wound reminded him he was mortal.

“What is going on? What happened to Lord Dunsmore?”

Servants surrounded Ainsley. Desmond looked from her to his brother. A panic settled in her eyes as she backed away from them all. She’d want an empty room to hide in and he knew just how to help her flee.

“Bertram, take Lady Dunsmore to Margaret and have her escorted to her room.”

He looked one last time at her. A pain too great forced him to bow his head and conceal his grimace from her worried face. The tears on her

cheeks were already more than he wanted to handle. He wished he didn't have to marry her under ill-fated circumstances. They were bad terms and hurtful to Ainsley. He hoped to never let her find out she was being used.

"Lord Dunsmore?" Ainsley covered her mouth to hide the intake of breath that had escaped.

Two men held him up. They headed for the house. The man called Bertram took her arm and ushered her through the wide-open front door. Each step she took, she glanced back at Lord Dunsmore supported between two servants. She prayed for his recovery and received a good sign by his reassuring smile.

"Margaret!" Bertram called and a woman rushed into the foyer.

Tall, wide and horribly cross-looking, the big woman came at her. She reminded her immediately of her mother's companion, Mavis. Ainsley didn't exactly dislike Mavis, but rather had a fear of her.

"Lord Dunsmore has been hurt and wants you to take Lady Dunsmore to her quarters." He practically shoved Ainsley at the woman.

"Oh dear. Come, child, let's get you to your room." Her face softened.

Ainsley followed. An empty room became the best news she had heard since leaving France.

She stopped halfway up and watched the men bringing Desmond up the same staircase. His head hung down and a shimmer of damp, dark mahogany hair hung in disarray. As if he sensed her stare, he lifted his gaze. His face, so pale and drained of blood, urged her to rush to him. Only Margaret held her arm tight.

"Come, they'll take care of your husband. It isn't the first time he's been in a bit of a fracas." She ushered Ainsley down a corridor and into a room.

They knew who she was or who she was supposed to be. She didn't have to speak the lie as Lord Dunsmore had commanded her.

"This is your room, child. It's nigh on sunrise, so we should get you a bath and into bed."

A bath? Bed? How could anyone think she'd close her eyes after what she had witnessed that night?

The knock at the door drew her immediate attention. Two men carried in her trunk.

"Lord Dunsmore, he's all right?" she asked them.

"We wouldn't know, m'lady."

The men hardly glanced her way as they set the trunk at the foot of her bed and bowed their way out of the room. She spun to the sounds of Lord Dunsmore's loud voice floating through her open door. The men were gone, the door shut and his disgruntled shout was cut off from her hearing.

"We'll get you all washed up and then tuck you right into a soft bed." Margaret shook her head. "A shame, too, this being your wedding time. Was it a nice ceremony?"

Ainsley bit her bottom lip.

"Oh you poor young thing, scared out of your wits, I bet. Well, you make yourself comfortable and I'll go see about that hot water for you to bathe." She bustled out of the room.

Ainsley looked outside the window at the start of a gloomy day. The sun that had started to come out had disappeared. The first drops of rain on the window proved that at once.

Tired from the travel across the English Channel and the journey by coach, she moved toward the bed. She'd had very little sleep since Lord Dunsmore whisked her away from France. As she studied the oasis of white bedding, she contemplated how easily she might fall asleep from her devastating exhaustion if she could forget what she had seen the night before.

Then the large bed, twice the size she was accustomed to, brought her a warning—she would not always be alone. One night, as well as an uncountable number of others, Lord Dunsmore would visit her, as was his right after they were married.

Ainsley sucked in a lungful of air and let it out. She fanned her face and gripped the bedpost as she let the idea of her impending marriage sink in. Stories, gossip and hearsay were her learning tools for years. She hid in corners and alcoves while servants went about their lives unknowingly teaching her about life. Lord Dunsmore's prior indulgence of touching her left her craving more. She already desired his caress, his sweet compliments and his scent.

Through a door, Ainsley heard a commotion. She moved toward it. Opening it a crack, she found a dressing room. Beyond, she assumed, was the marquess's room. Cautiously, so no one heard or saw, she crept into the closet and watched the activity from the gap the unlatched door left.

Lord Dunsmore sat in a chair, tugging at his cravat while a servant peeled off his blood-soaked clothing. Muscles moved beneath his tawny skin. A mat of dark hair funneled up the middle of his stomach and spread over his chest. Marring his beautiful torso was a six-inch gash along his ribs.

Ainsley gasped in sympathetic pain for him and quickly covered her mouth. However, Lord Dunsmore had heard and turned in her direction. He was the only one to hear her and while he'd not be able to see her in the dark closet, it didn't stop him from winking.

For ten minutes, Bertram cleaned Lord Dunsmore's wound and stitched it with a needle and thread. Never having been afflicted by a cut so deep, Ainsley cringed each time the needle poked his flesh.

"I'll get you a clean shirt," a man, almost the spitting image of the marquess, said.

She hadn't noticed the man before.

"Blasted man, not so tight." Lord Dunsmore threw back his head and clenched his jaw as Bertram bandaged him up.

"Serves him right, Bertram. Ignore my brother's squalling like a woman and cinch it snug. Can't do to have Desmond bleeding all over the house like a stuck pig ready for the butchering."

It made sense the man was Lord Dunsmore's brother.

“Wait.” Lord Dunsmore stopped his brother from striding to his dressing room and finding her. “I have a fresh shirt there in that bag.” He waved his hand toward the floor.

His brother went for the bag and the marquess directed his intense stare toward her for a second, then motioned for her to go. She ran back to her room. The door from the hallway opened and Margaret barreled in followed by two men toting water. They went behind a screen and she heard the splash of water in a copper tub. Once they were gone, she peered around the ornate gold and ivory screen to see the steaming bath.

“Let’s get you out of that soiled rag and into some clean garments.”

Ainsley stepped back. The woman aimed to strip her naked while on the other side of the closet there were at least three men.

“I prefer to be a-alone,” she stammered.

“Aren’t you sweet and I see you do have a tongue in that pretty little mouth of yours. I’ll stay and see that everything is done proper.”

“Leave me alone.” Ainsley insisted, louder than she intended.

Margaret continued her approach and Ainsley shrank back until a wall kept her from moving. Suddenly, the dressing room door flew open and she held her hands up to prevent it from hitting her.

“What’s going on in here?” the marquess demanded.

“Nothing to worry about, m’lord. The child is having a bit of a tantrum.” Margaret gave a nervous laugh.

“Where is she, hiding under the bed?”

Ainsley put out a hand. She couldn’t speak and at first she stretched her arm toward him until her fingers were an inch from touching his back. She leaned a little more and tapped him.

He didn’t turn or act surprised at her position by the wall.

“Leave us,” he ordered.

Margaret opened the door to the hallway and stepped outside.

“And Margaret, Lady Dunsmore is to be given her due respect. She is mistress of this manor and my wife, not a child.”

“Yes, m’lord.” She bowed and backed from the room.

"I cannot solve your problems every time." The marquess moved away, leaving the door a barrier between them. "Aside from me, you rule this house and everyone in it."

"I'm...I'm not your wife," she whispered, needing to make a point of reminding him.

"In the morning I will remedy that legality, but for personal and practical purposes you are. I'll leave you now as I see the steam to your bath cooling." He gripped the glass doorknob.

"M'lord?"

"Yes."

"Are you all right? I mean your wound. It's not terribly bad, is it?" She peeked around the door and looked up at him.

"Hurts like the deuce, m'lady, but I will be quite right in a couple days, no thanks to you." He touched the tip of her nose.

Ainsley returned his smile and he pulled the door shut, leaving her in the room. Alone at last, she tried relaxing.

Ainsley looked at the tub and considered the door from which the marquess had entered. He seemed the nicest man on earth. However, the lingering memory of his fight proved he had a rough side. Maybe evilness she hadn't seen. Her apprehension of undressing with him able to come into her room at any time left her unsteady. She wanted to slink into the tub of hot water and soak away her tension. But he could enter at will. Wife or not, there would be no one to prevent him or help her.

Making a choice to wash off quickly, she picked up a cloth. The soft cotton fell to the floor when she turned to the sudden knock.

"Who is it?"

"It's Lydia, Lady Dunsmore. Lord Dunsmore sent me to tend to you," a young girl's voice replied.

The door opened and Ainsley watched curiously as the girl, no older than herself, came in.

"And Margaret?"

“Oh she’s been...she’s been sent elsewhere for the time, m’lady. Lord Dunsmore thought you would feel more comfortable with someone younger. If you object I can go.”

“No,” Ainsley blurted. “No, don’t go.”

She looked at the dressing-room door. Her heart pitter-pattered for the man, but she needed time to sort through the wave of sensations. His consideration of her feelings did have limits. Nevertheless, even with his advances, he was a handsome man.

“How old are you, Lydia?”

“Eighteen, m’lady.” She moved to fold the downy covers back on the bed. “Is there anything you need? Something I could get you? It must have been such an ordeal for you when those men attacked the coach.”

“Yes.” Ainsley only got one word out.

“And the marquess, heroically protecting his bride at risk to himself, is the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard beyond a fairytale.” She sighed.

Ainsley liked Lydia immediately. She didn’t talk of having to do this or that. Instead, she chirped on about pleasantries, and anything that took attention away from Ainsley was always a welcome relief.

“Do you wish me to fetch something for you? The cook has made delicious spiced cookies. That and a smidge of wine should relax you just right for a nap.” Lydia’s eagerness to please was different than Margaret’s and Ainsley appreciated the girl asked rather than dictated.

Ainsley wanted to say yes to anything offered, yet just a nap sounded good.

“Nothing, thank you. My stomach is in a ball of knots.” She sat on the bed. “I do think I’d like to sleep.”

Lydia headed for the door.

“Wait, would you stay?”

Her mother’s servant always stayed in the duchess’s room. Ainsley had never asked for one to stay with her. She had never feared someone joining her.

“Why of course, m’lady. I’m here to do your bidding. I’ll sit in the chair until you sleep.”

Lydia plopped down on the seat, and with her hands folded in her lap, she hummed a tune. Ainsley closed her eyes and let the melody whisk her into dreamland—wonderful, sweet thoughts of Lord Dunsmore.

Chapter Seven

Desmond opened the dressing-room door. He had spent an hour wondering about Ainsley. He'd sent Bertram away, expecting to get some sleep. Only the more he thought of his beautiful bride, the more he had an urge to see her again.

He gave one look at Lydia in the chair. She surprised him by being there. Nevertheless, she'd not think it strange for him to be in his wife's room. Everyone in the household would expect him to visit his wife, and often, if they had noticed his thirst for women.

The door clicked at Lydia's departure and Ainsley's eyes opened. In the low lamplight, he saw fear in the startled blue irises. A whole passel of thoughts rampaged through him like the thunder of a storm. The greatest one prevented him from even trying to seduce her. Young, sweet and scared, she sat and he had no wish to spoil a future by hurrying to sate his growing hunger for her heart-shaped lips.

"You can't. We're not married, m'lord." She looked around the room.

"I've sent Lydia away for the time being." He bent over her and put a finger to her lips. "Don't be frightened."

He let his finger drift along her bottom lip. It trembled unmercifully and he pitied the timid creature. Her innocence reinforced his lust. He hadn't planned to do anything other than come in the room and sit with her. Leaning over, he captured her lovely mouth. She froze like an icicle and he pulled away to see her face ashen and her body still.

Tears leaked from the outside corners of her petrified blue eyes.

"I'll sit over here, not on the chair, but on the floor." He heard her muffled sob. "I told you I wouldn't hurt you, so there's no need to cry."

He hated tears from a woman. It seemed whenever a woman cried it was to get something from him, to coerce him into doing their bidding. Maybe Ainsley's tears were the same. He walked away from others and their blubbering, whereas he couldn't depart with such callous disregard of the tormented young woman and her difficulties dealing with people.

"I still hear you," he said from his place on the floor. "Now stop crying or I'll be forced to come up there and sit on the bed again. Or maybe that's what you want."

She sniffed up the last sob and went silent.

"You know I don't believe I've ever set a girl to wailing for giving her one simple kiss. You do have an odd way about you. It would make one think that you've never been kissed, before me that is. But how could that be? You're as pretty as the summer sun. Surely, some stable boy has stolen a kiss or two from your honeyed lips. Of course, if I find out one has, it would mean a calling out at dawn. Maybe I should say dusk." He glanced at the window and the milky haze of day. "How could I live knowing any man has gotten away with what I wish to have? Oh, woe is poor, poor pitiful Lord Dunsmore. His wife will not kiss him and he is bound to never kiss another woman for the rest of his life."

Ainsley responded with an adorable giggle. He hadn't expected her to think his humor funny.

"What is that I hear, crying or by chance was that a snicker over my plight?"

He leaned sideways to see her sitting up on the bed.

"Ouch." He grabbed his side and swore mutely.

"M'lord, are you all right?" She peered around the bedpost.

He examined the blood staining his clean shirt and covered it with a hand. "I'll be fine." He started to get up, then leaned back upon the wall, depleted of energy.

"No you're not." She hopped off the bed. "I'll get someone for you."

"No." He grabbed her nightgown to prevent her from going to the door.

"But, you're bleeding." She knelt down. "What can I do?"

"Nothing. I've pulled a few stitches, that's all. We'll pretend it's a few spots of wine and that I must be more careful where I spill my glass."

"Please don't jest. It's my fault. If you hadn't tried to make me feel better, this wouldn't...you'd not be in pain."

"Nonsense, it's not your fault." He took her hand.

Desmond wasn't sure why he wanted her to like him. The marriage plans were for him to gain acceptance by the Prince Regent.

Ainsley moved closer. The scent of her surrounded him. As he watched her overcome fears, her attraction to him became apparent. Her mouth closed in on his and he shut his eyes, wishing with all his soul to have the cautious little snail came out of her shell.

"I've heard a kiss would make a hurt feel better." She brushed her lips against his.

He had awoken something in her. She kissed lightly, like a butterfly perches on the most delicate flower.

"M'lord, you won't have to duel with anyone. You have been the only one to kiss me. Teach me how to kiss you."

He could have died with her endearing words. Cocking his head, he slanted his mouth over hers. The flavor of her breath charged into him, and for the first time, she participated in the art of kissing.

"Ainsley," he spoke softly and cupped her cheek. "You already know how to kiss me."

She lowered her lashes while offering her smile.

He pulled her back for another taste. This time her tongue slid into his mouth. He gave her free reign to explore to her heart's content and it made him want her with a greater urgency than before.

Desmond kissed her face, down her neck to her shoulder. He tugged the gown over the edge and nibbled her dainty shoulder.

"M'lord?"

Did she think he'd stop when they were this close to consummating their relationship? His blood pulsed through his veins, thumping in his

chest as if his heart were to explode. His need to free her of clothing became critical.

“M’lord?” She tried getting away.

“Don’t be afraid.” He held her tighter while fighting the pain in his body and ignoring the pounding in his head.

“But, m’lord, it’s...” She turned her face away.

“Call me Desmond,” he urged as he nibbled at her ear.

The drumming vibrations continued and he soon realized his body wasn’t making the sounds. Someone hammered on the dressing-room door and his gaze followed Ainsley’s.

Desmond struggled to his feet. It touched him the way Ainsley held his arm to help. He took her hand, brushed a kiss to her warm knuckles and put her behind the door he would open.

“It’s Lord Harlan, m’lord,” Bertram exclaimed. “He’s set out to find that man you had the fight with. Lady Edwina is hysterical. I know this is not a good time and I’m sorry for the intrusion.”

“I’ll be there shortly.” He pushed the door closed and looked at Ainsley. Her timid appearance gave him no indication of her thoughts. “Go back to bed.”

“Lady Edwina?” Her puzzled expression was adorable.

“My sister. I’d ask you to...never mind...go back to bed.” He’d not ask her to face his sister’s upset.

Ainsley hurried to get dressed after Lord Dunsmore left. Positive he wanted to ask her to help with his sister, she wanted to assist to please him. Besides, questions needed answers. Who were the men he’d confronted on their journey to the Dunsmore estate? Why did he insist she say they were married? Mostly she wanted to know how she’d fit into a family busy with problems.

Ainsley opened her door. It seemed too quiet for anyone to be in hysterics. She swallowed her dread when it came to dealing with people

and stepped out of the room. Lord Dunsmore wanted her to be his wife and mistress of his home, and she didn't want to disappoint him.

With a deep breath, she approached the railing of the upstairs landing. She needed someone to tell her where to go.

"You there!" she called down to a servant. "Can you show me where I can find Lady Edwina?"

"Yes, Lady Dunsmore, she is in the drawing room." He pointed across the foyer to a room out of view.

Ainsley held up the skirt of her dress and hurried down the stairs to where the servant waited.

"I am Gerald, m'lady." He bowed his head in greeting. "Please follow me."

She walked softly behind him and when they reached the large drawing room, it felt like a thousand people stared at her. Out of the group of servants, the lady with Desmond and his brother, Ainsley focused on Desmond.

"Lady Edwina." Desmond drew his sister up from the settee. "Come meet your sister-in-law, Lady Dunsmore."

"How do you do?" Lady Edwina sobbed. "It's very nice to meet you, Lady Dunsmore. I'm sorry I'm not in better spirits."

"It's nice to meet you as well, Lady Edwina." Ainsley gave a faint smile.

Desmond touched Ainsley's shoulder. The tender glide of his fingers left a heated trail of sparks on her skin. The reminder of his statement of how he wanted her in his bed made her blush. Her gaze rose to meet his and she lowered her lashes immediately, hoping he'd not guess what her silly mind had wandered off to think about.

"M'lady, I have to go. My brother, Lord Harlan, feels it a duty to take matters into his own hands regarding the men with whom I had a fight. Could you...would you...while I go find him, take care of Edwina?"

She looked at his blood-speckled shirt and up to him. Her hand touched his stomach.

"I'll be all right," he assured her with an affectionate squeeze of her arm.

Ainsley touched him briefly, then circled her arm around Lady Edwina's.

"We'll get acquainted while Lord Dunsmore goes to help Lord Harlan. He'll make everything all right, you'll see," Ainsley said as cheerfully as she could.

This was something she could do. Her mother had given her years of practice in coddling someone in tears. Rowena had done her fair share, too. Hysterical women actually made Ainsley feel stronger and more confident.

"I'll be back soon." Lord Dunsmore kissed Edwina's temple.

For Ainsley, he squeezed the tips of her fingers gently. The affectionate gesture caused her grip to tighten for an instant.

She mustered up the courage to make him proud and turned to his sister. "As you will find out quickly, Lady Edwina, I am dreadfully shy. If you'd be kind enough to lead me to an empty room, I'd be most grateful."

They walked a few feet and then Ainsley glanced back at Lord Dunsmore. Bertram was helping him put on his jacket—a chore that pained the marquess judging by the expression on his face.

Lord Dunsmore hesitantly raised his hand to the area of his injury and then stopped without touching it. He glanced her way and his warm smile expressed his appreciation. She offered him the same before she went with Lady Edwina to a less-traveled area of the mansion.

"You don't seem the least bit shy." Edwina sniffled and looked at her with water-soaked, brown eyes.

"It is an act, I assure you. Lord Dunsmore has commanded I not cry. He has also directed I act the mistress of this house." Ainsley's deflection of Lady Edwina's upsets to that of her own worked.

"Well, don't let him bully you. My brother is very sweet, but awfully bossy. He's a tyrant when it comes to getting his own way." Her blotchy face began clearing as each word directed her thoughts away from the troubles.

“So is Margaret,” Ainsley confessed.

“Desmond sent her away.”

“Where?”

“I heard him tell Harlan she was to go to the house in London. Desmond has never done that before, but no bother. She doesn’t much like me.”

“Did he say why?” She felt awful thinking she may have been the reason the woman was displaced from her home. Why else would he have made her go if not on her behalf?

“No, I didn’t hear that part.” Edwina sniffed up some more tears and wiped at her face. “They wouldn’t let me in Desmond’s room. I am treated like a child. In two weeks, I’ll be seventeen and I’m left out of all conversations unless they’re about social affairs. I tried listening at the door, but that is almost useless. His door must be the thickest in the house because I can barely hear anything through it.”

For hours, they talked. Ainsley wasn’t sure if Lady Edwina still worried about her brothers, but she did. What were they up to and why were people getting hurt? She tried not to let her imagination get the best of her.

Chapter Eight

Through the stained-glass windows of the grand ballroom, the afternoon sun washed a haze of rainbow-tinted light across the marble floor. Desmond stopped in the doorway and appreciated the tender scene of Ainsley and Edwina asleep. On the far side, curled up on a gold brocade settee, lay his dear sister, Edwina.

The way Ainsley sat, slouched and fully asleep, didn't look at all comfortable.

To keep his brother silent, he smiled and put a finger to his lips. They tried striding quietly across the marble. However, the hard heels of their boots woke their sister.

Edwina smiled wearily. "You're home at last." She stood and hugged Harlan.

"Yes, he wouldn't let me track down the lout who cut him," Harlan grumbled.

"We can't both get ourselves filleted like fish at the same time." Desmond laughed softly. "Would you two mind leaving me to wake...my wife?"

Each time he said the word, the amazing warmth of pride slid through his limbs.

His sister kissed him. "She's very nice and I'm so glad, because I think she'll make you happy."

Desmond stared at Ainsley while he waited for Harlan and Edwina to leave. With everything he was involved in, he didn't have a lot of room for contentment. How could the lovely, bashful lady, sound asleep like an angel, be anything but extremely nice. It took a great deal of character for

her to face everyone and come to help his sister. He witnessed it in her eyes when she stood in the doorframe. Her hands clenching her dress suggested she just might change her mind and run.

"M'lady." He held her smooth, tapered fingers to his lips. "Ainsley, wake up," he whispered.

"Desmond," she murmured sleepily.

"Yes."

"Be careful."

"I was exceedingly careful." He chuckled, watching her confused, blue eyes fly open.

He didn't want to witness her lovely dream of him fade. She had spoken to him in her sleep and now she nervously recoiled while awake.

"I could sit on the other side of the room if you'd prefer," he teased.

Her grip tightened. It pleased him and stirred the dark waters of his yearning body.

"Edwina is with Harlan," he told her when she looked around. "Thank you for taking care of her."

"He's all right?"

"I got to him before he could get into trouble."

"And you? The wound is still mending?"

"It will heal quite well."

"It's afternoon?" She looked at the windows.

"Yes. I thought we'd wait until tomorrow for our secret outing. No one will be any the wiser." He stood and brought her out of the chair. "Then tomorrow afternoon we are to... Ainsley, what is wrong?" He took both her hands and held them. "No, I think I know. If you're not too tired, we can go now. It's shameful of me to make you wait this long for your wedding."

"Maybe we should wait." Her hand floated up toward his face.

She withdrew it quickly, as if it was a breach in etiquette. He caught her wrist and pulled her fingers against his face.

"I'll always desire your touch."

"You will?" Her curious confusion twisted his smile wider.

"Why would I not?" He covered her hand gently to keep the cool palm upon the curve of his jaw.

"In my upbringing, I was told men do not like displays of affection."

"Ah, the words of wisdom from women spurned by their spouses, no doubt." He sighed. "It's not accurate at all."

"It's not?" A winsome smile started with her sparkling eyes.

"Men marrying out of necessity may wish to keep their distance, but..."

"Is that not your reason for marrying?"

Desmond pulled her palm to his lips and kissed it. "Yes, and with all rules, there are exceptions."

Ainsley was not only worthy of a man's affection, she deserved it. He was the one undeserving of hers.

"You look tired. You've not slept for two days, have you?" She stroked his cheek.

"I'll sleep once we're married." He leaned down to kiss her and she turned away.

"I'm sorry, I'm nervous."

He pulled her face up. Taking her lips in his, he sucked on her tongue the moment it slipped into place. When he let it retreat and he ventured to lick at her lips, she sucked on his tongue.

Nestled against him, she fit into his embrace.

"Do you know how good it feels to hold you?"

She smiled and shook her head.

He caressed her cheek with the back of his hand. "We should go. There will be questions. Let me handle them. I know a vicar who will perform the service and keep quiet on all else. I do have one small favor to ask of you."

"Anything."

"I doubt it would be anything, but I understand your need to please me and it is not overlooked. You are sweet and I daresay you will be missed in the duchess's household."

"I will be greatly missed because my mother now has no daughters to order about."

"She was hard on you?" He frowned.

"She was strict in a loving way."

"One day you'll be her equal. My father is dead, so the title of duke will pass from my grandfather to me."

"I'm sorry." Her breath sputtered. "I mean about your father's death, not becoming duke, of course."

"Thank you. Anyway, you will be a duchess and maybe you will have daughters to rule in the way you feel is best."

"I don't think I need a title to raise children. Besides, you're already a marquess and that's a suitable position. Is it not enough?"

"You don't want to be a duchess?"

"A title is not who I am. If it's a title you wish to have one day, I'll be honored to be at your side. Did I miss you asking me for a favor?" she reminded him.

"No, you didn't. What I need is for you to say we were married three days ago. Our pretense must go on forever. It should not prove hard as time goes by."

"I don't understand. What difference would it make what day we were married?"

"My grandfather has done a beastly thing, I'm afraid, and has sacrificed me, my home and all else I love. You are a cousin of the king and Prince Regent."

"Yes, I know, though I've never met them. What does that have to do with when we were married?"

"Well, you are about to meet the Prince Regent tomorrow night. His Highness is having one of his dinner parties and afterward we will be spending the weekend with him at his country home."

“Still, why must we lie about when we got married?”

“The prince does not approve of my grandfather or my family.” He heaved a heavy sigh of resignation. “My grandfather would like me to be well received in society.”

“You still have me confused.”

Not only beautiful and bashful, she had a mind not easily deceived or distracted.

“The Prince Regent was informed we were married yesterday.” He explained as little as possible. “The banns have been read and everything was set.”

He realized he said too much, too late. The original plan was to wed the Lady Delacorte in France. But Ainsley said nothing and he decided she might not have been aware of all details of the duchess’s plot.

“Then, we shall explain our marriage was an unforeseeable postponement. I’m sure it doesn’t matter to the prince when we take our vows.”

“But it would look poorly on the Duke of Berkenshire and my whole family if the lie were to get out.” He sat and put his head in his hands a minute to think.

“Are you ill, m’lord?”

“Quite.” He snatched her hand before she could go fetch someone. “Once my grandfather had the duchess’s permission for our marriage, he used that to obtain the invitation to the prince’s party.”

“But...”

“He said we were married three days ago. That was the reason we were to be married right away in France. Your sister and I, that is.”

“Yet, you said the banns have been read here, so you never planned to marry anywhere else.”

Desmond had to think fast to get himself out of the hole he’d dug himself into. Lies were getting too complicated. “I could not in all good conscience, marry anywhere else than here in my own country. Let’s say it was a matter of pride.”

“Your pride?” She looked directly at him. “And still, I’m a pawn?”

“Yes. Our marriage was for your name.” He wished she hadn’t questioned him, yet she deserved some answers.

“It really didn’t matter which Delacorte you married.” She turned away.

He expected her reaction to be one of devastation.

“You see why I couldn’t let you back out of the deal your mother and I made?”

“I confess I don’t understand what you are really trying to do.”

Desmond felt ill deceiving her, an innocent victim of circumstance. Telling her everything about his recent participation in a plot to return Napoleon to France, however, was too risky. The less she knew the better.

“After we’re married, I’ll be compelled to do as you ask.” She lowered her gaze. “Our wedding date will be as you say, three days ago if that is your wish.”

He stood and took her hand. “It is my need. My wish would have been to do many things differently.”

Desmond speculated that Ainsley’s shyness stemmed from her scandalous father. That man would be the one responsible for her introverted personality. Her father had drunk within the same circle as his own father. He had gambled beyond his means and died bankrupt, putting his family out to the streets. Desmond knew the whole story that had sent them to France in a self-exile.

Ainsley had risen above the harshness of her circumstances before and he believed she’d do so again.

“Remember, not a word to anyone.” He walked her to her bedroom door. “Dress as you would for any normal outing and I’ll have a carriage readied for us in fifteen minutes, if that is enough time.”

She nodded and went inside. Since they’d met, he had tried to form a bond that would let her trust him. He saw it stretched thin, maybe irreparable, as she gave him one last look of disappointment before

closing her door. It put a lump in his throat and his chest constricted with burning self-hatred.

Chapter Nine

Ainsley sat in the carriage with her blue satin parasol placed on the seat alongside her. She didn't want to be upset with Desmond. She liked him in a very different way from how she had ever liked anyone else.

"Do we have far to travel?" She nestled back against the seat.

"An hour, I believe."

The carriage bumped over a rut in the road. Ainsley's one hand went involuntarily to the side of the carriage and the other to Desmond's thigh. He covered it before she could pull away.

"You look very beautiful in blue. The gown deepens the color of your eyes." He picked her hand up and held it to his chest.

The thump of his heart fell in time with hers. She liked the vibration upon her palm.

"I h-heard you liked blue," she breathed faintly.

"And you wore this because I might favor blue over other colors?" He drew the reins back and the horse slowed.

"I don't want you to be annoyed with me."

The carriage stopped. Ainsley swallowed hard.

"I am most certainly not annoyed with you." He fastened off the reins and twisted to face her. "Listen to me carefully."

He slid his hand over his head, smoothing and grooming the wind-ruffled hair.

With a tortured expression, he rubbed a hand over his jaw. She didn't want to know anything worse than what he had already divulged. She'd be his wife because he needed one.

“Just know, I think we can have a good marriage. Not a display, but a real marriage. I’ll do my best not to disappoint you.”

She leaned toward him, offering up her kiss, needing to feel the bargain sealed.

A sly smile crossed his face and he took advantage as she hoped. He pulled her in to receive his kiss. The horse shifted and the carriage swayed, making her lean against Desmond more. His mouth sucked at the skin beneath her jaw and trailed kisses over her collarbone, down to where her breasts swelled the collar of the blue dress.

He moved on to the ache he created and didn’t let fabric stop his teeth from latching onto the tip of her breast. His fingers played with her other nipple and the intense fire began radiating through her.

“I want to taste you,” he murmured.

“Lord Dunsmore,” she panted, intending to protest.

“Desmond, remember.” His head lifted and his hypnotic stare prevented her from noticing the way he had worked her gown up her legs.

His hot, damp hands rubbed her knees, her thighs and held her hips.

“What are you doing?” she managed to ask before her throat went too dry to speak.

She fell back as he pulled her bottom forward to the edge of the seat. His mouth crashed against hers and while he kissed her into submission, he jerked her underpants down off her hips. A cool blast of air shot up into the heated recess deep between her legs.

She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to pretend. What could she pretend, she wondered. Her legs were forced open.

“You can’t seriously mean to...” She gripped the seat. “Please, m’lord, not here, in plain view of...of... Oh, God!”

Flames of mortification spread over her already burning skin. The swipe of his finger raked between her nether lips.

“I’m going to make you lust to experience everything.” He teased the folds of skin, circling one erogenous button of flesh.

She felt faint.

"It feels good, doesn't it?" He pinched her clit and tugged.

"Uh-huh," she moaned.

The heat grew intense, and involuntarily, her hips jerked. The way her heart pounded fiercely, she feared she'd die under his persistent attack as her insides exploded in tumultuous shudders.

"Desmond, please...please I can't take any more."

His fingers probed and the unpleasant pressure drew her hips from him. He cooed an apology she didn't understand. Even though she objected, she didn't want him to stop.

"It'll be all right." He nipped at her lips while kissing her.

If it weren't for the stabs of discomfort in the pit of her belly, she'd believe him. Her enervated fingers latched onto his dark head to push him away. Yet, she couldn't. Instead, she pulled him more firmly against her mouth.

The ache he stirred with the thrust of his fingers into her nether region finally peaked. From inside her quivering sex, a warm trickle of fluid oozed out and down between the cheeks of her bottom.

She slumped into an exhausted euphoria.

Her leg muscles were tense as Desmond began fixing her clothes. At first, she couldn't move one single, tired limb to help. The shock of it all left her in a dreamlike trance. It took Desmond's gentleness to make her blink.

His lips touched hers.

She slid her arms around his neck. Pulling him to her kiss, savoring his adoring kindness with a need to enjoy everything he wanted from her.

She tipped her head back in his cupped palm and smiled.

"I think I should marry you." He kissed hurriedly over her lips.

"Because of your grandfather?"

"No, because someone might spirit you away before I get to know every last sweet ounce of your body and your thoughts."

He resumed his position next to her, took the reins in hand and snapped them several times.

Ainsley turned to face him, believing he teased her, yet his face remained serious. She smiled and rubbed her arms with a shiver of excitement. She liked the way his aggressive nature overpowered her shyness.

Ainsley looked out at the pastures as they rode and several horses caught her attention. "You have such a lovely estate. I should think I will love it here very much."

She twisted to watch the horses. The foal ran wildly one way and then the other, with his tail held high. He never ventured far from his mother. Strangely, she didn't feel as distanced from her mother as she thought she would.

"I'm glad you like it. I've always felt at ease here. It's my sanctuary from the harshness of the world." He put a hand on hers and held her fingers snug.

She looked at everything with interest. The carriage picked up a rhythm, lulling her weary body. Sleep fought to take over.

"You can put your head on my shoulder and close your eyes for a bit," Desmond offered, as if he read her mind.

"I'm all right. It was a long night and day, but I've got a second wind from the fresh air."

"All right, I command it." His green gaze met hers. "Go on." He spoke soft and gentle.

She put her cheek against his sleeve. The lightweight wool, a little coarse against her skin, was still comfortable, especially when she let herself mold against his arm. She hadn't known love other than family. And, no matter what anyone said, she had loved her father.

The carriage stopped and Ainsley opened her eyes. Desmond's arm had moved around her shoulders, putting her closer to his lean, hard body.

"Are we there?" To avoid his stare, she looked at the vista of rolling, green pastures.

"Just around the next bend, but I thought you might want to have a moment to gather your thoughts." He tipped her face up and took a handkerchief from his pocket. "And freshen your face. There are those tears again. Not because of me, I hope."

"I'm sorry. I was thinking about my father."

"The drunk," he said coldly.

"I...he wasn't always." Anger stirred in her and she straightened.

"That was mean, I apologize."

"He wasn't always," she repeated lower.

"Neither was my father. However, he hurt a lot of people by drinking too much and engaging in activities that shamed my family."

"Your father was like that?" She stared at him, surprised.

"Yes, and from what I understand our fathers were friends. They spent time together cavorting and carousing."

"If they were friends then they should have looked after one another. Maybe if they had talked as men should, they could have convinced each other of the wrongs they were doing to their families by their overindulgence." She pinched her lips, determined not to cry.

"What they did was as acceptable as a million other things the ton still enjoys for pleasure." He rubbed the back of his hand over her cheek. "No more thoughts of bad things, okay?"

Ainsley nodded and smiled up at him. Her heart throbbed with affection for Desmond. Handsome, compassionate and sexually alluring, he would gain more than a wife—she'd be his friend.

They drove around that next bend and stopped before a beautiful church ensconced in a dense stand of conifers on the outskirts of a village. A quaint country setting offered tranquility. Ainsley liked the place very much.

Instead of the church, Desmond led her to the arched doorway of the vicarage. He tapped firm and loud. Within minutes, the somewhat short door opened and an equally squat, round man appeared.

"Come in, come in, Lord Dunsmore and m'lady." He stepped back and waved them to enter.

Ainsley crossed the threshold and turned to watch her tall groom duck beneath the lintel of the doorframe. They followed the man into the charming room filled with books and papers.

"Forgive the mess, Lord Dunsmore, but I tend to immerse myself so greatly in my reading I forget to clean up the clutter." He grinned and bobbed his head as he talked.

Ainsley tried to listen as the vicar hustled them farther into the little room.

"If I might get you to sign the register, m'lord." He lifted a bible, leaned over a large ledger and handed Desmond a quill.

Desmond looked over the page and turned it back one. His long tan forefinger slid down the list of dates and names. Then he scrolled his name in a quick flourish. He dipped the quill in ink and handed it to her.

"If you will, m'lady?" He motioned for her to sign the book.

She did so, and once the quill was in his hand again, he added the date from three days before. It disheartened her that he hadn't changed his mind about the course he took.

He took her arm and for five minutes she listened to the vicar ramble through the words of the ceremony. When he called her Rowena, her heart nearly stopped. It reminded her that she was not the one Lord Dunsmore had planned to marry.

Desmond told the vicar of the error and the man apologized, but his words from then on seemed in haste to complete the ceremony.

"Wait here a minute." Desmond left her next to the table.

She watched him lead the parson away and hand him a considerable sum of money. They whispered, making it impossible for her to hear.

"Bless you, my children."

Ainsley hadn't time to ask the vicar if they were married or not. Desmond went from talking to the man to hurrying her out the door. His

hands wrapped her waist and he hoisted her into the carriage. She felt like a sack of turnips.

She jammed herself as close to the side of the carriage as possible and remained quiet. Too many questions danced in her head. They all kicked at her as if she was a fool. She couldn't believe the marriage real.

"You have nothing to say?" he asked.

"No."

"If you're worried over the legalities, don't. It was all quite legal."

"The banns were read for three Sundays with my sister's name," she mumbled.

"A minor error no one would think to question. Besides I gave him a hefty sum to forget the inaccuracy."

She sat silent and disturbed for ten minutes before asking him to confirm their union. "We're really married?"

He handed her a scroll. She hadn't even seen the vicar give it to him. Unfurling the parchment, she looked over their names, separate and linked. Ainsley Rawlington, the Marchioness of Dunsmore, had been written perfectly clear on the marriage certificate. With that accuracy, she had no choice but to believe Desmond.

"It's dated three days ago."

"Yes, and I've paid handsomely for the favor."

"But, he lied." She looked back with a tremor in her soul and couldn't help think they had been bound by the devil's hand and not God's. "It seems unholy."

"However, it's legal." He took the parchment and tucked it inside his jacket.

They didn't speak the rest of the ride back to the estate. The gray, moss-covered stone fortress housed secrets she wasn't privy to, yet seemed to be a part of.

The sun had descended behind the rise of the hills in the west. Too tired to worry about anything, she welcomed the idea of going to bed for the night. Her stomach grumbled and she put a hand to her middle.

“You haven’t eaten today, have you?” He lifted her from the carriage.

She hadn’t been able to eat much since she left France. Shaking her head in answer to his question made her dizzy. Her knees wobbled and the air stirred faster around her limbs. The stone floor would be hard and unyielding. Nevertheless, she couldn’t stop the descent as she fainted.

Chapter Ten

Desmond sat in the chair next to Ainsley's bed and watched his wife. Five hours had passed since he had caught her collapsing in the courtyard. He dozed off for a time himself only to wake startled by a nightmare.

"Desmond?" she whimpered in her sleep and he moved to sit on the mattress.

"I'm here as I always hope to be when you call." He leaned down to kiss her lightly on the lips.

She remained asleep and he examined everything about her precious face. In some ways, her small, delicate features were childlike. However, the blush to her skin and the plum tint to her lips added a mature desirability.

Her thick auburn lashes fluttered against the soft curve of her cheeks and he stroked her neck, waiting for her to look up at him.

She smiled dreamily, opening her eyes.

"Are you truly awake?"

"I think so." She smiled.

He captured her exhale in his kiss and her hands came to rest lightly on his shoulders. Her lips moved and he let her take all the time she needed to reacquaint herself with his mouth.

Her stomach rumbled and he lifted.

"You don't have to stop." She followed, pressing her lips to his.

Desmond sat up and chuckled. "You're hungry and if I don't feed you soon, you'll faint again. I can't have that if I'm to enjoy my kisses."

He pulled her up and delighted in every smile he enticed from her. The way she shrank from people reminded him of the morning glories that did not like the bright light of day. At dawn, they were cheerful flowers. By afternoon, they were pinched tight to keep the blinding light from wilting them. He vowed to keep Ainsley forever in bloom.

Desmond got the tray from the table and carried it to her.

"I should get out of bed."

"No, you will eat and rest to regain your strength."

He waited until she scooted back against the pillows before setting the tray down.

"I've all night to sleep."

"I'm afraid you wouldn't get much with me in the room." He backed away from her. "I believe you need one full night to recover from all you've been through these past few days."

* * *

Desmond never encountered a night as long as the one he had lying in his bed in a room close to the one his wife slept in. All night he resisted the urge to go next door and climb onto the mattress with her.

With the sun barely up in the morning, he tapped on her door and received a cheerful bid from her to enter.

"Good morning." His smile widened at the disheveled, yet beautiful sight of her still in bed.

"M'lord, I was expecting Lydia."

"If you'd known it was I, would you have turned me away?"

"No."

"Was your sleep restful?" He walked to the window and looked out at the start of a glorious day.

"It was so good I didn't want to get up. That's my reason for lingering here."

"I hate to remind you we are to travel to the palace today. But our plans cannot be changed." More than anything, he wanted to tell her they wouldn't go. He'd much rather crawl into her bed and tell her they never had to get up again. "We leave in an hour."

"One hour?" She wrinkled her forehead.

Desmond opened the bedroom door to leave and found Lydia standing with a pitcher of clean water.

"Yes," he answered and motioned Lydia into the room. "See that Lady Dunsmore has everything she needs for our trip."

"Yes, m'lord." Lydia bowed her head and went to his wife's bedside.

He went downstairs feeling satisfied that everything was falling into place. With Ainsley at his side, he'd be accepted into the prince's circle of friends just as his grandfather wished. His concern lay with Ainsley and her inquiries. Up until now, her exhausted stupor kept her from asking too many questions. He didn't think he had it in him to lie to her if she pried further.

"Lord Dunsmore, wait," Ainsley called to him.

"Yes?" He stopped and looked back in surprise.

A vision of loveliness, she had rushed from her room and down to him with breathless urgency.

"I don't think I can attend the dinner party. I'm not good around people and I'm not capable of lying if questioned about our wedding."

"You'll be fine." He took her arm and turned her about. "Now go dress for our trip and don't forget to eat."

"I don't want to go." She tapped the banister nervously.

"You will go and you will enjoy yourself. I'll personally see to that."

"I don't like gatherings. I haven't even been presented to court."

Desmond looked at her in disbelief. "But you said you've been to parties."

"My mother's events and those of her friends. Mostly they were in France."

“Well, no matter. Your coming out is no longer necessary since you’re a married woman now. No one will care that you’ve not been presented. You’ll be introduced to the Prince Regent and upon his approval, the deed is done.”

“Oh please, m’lord, could you not say I was ill?”

“You would have me blatantly lie about your health to a royal cousin who wants to meet you, yet you cannot forget your wedding date?” His irritation grew with each shake of her head.

“M’lord, I could—”

“You’re going and that’s all I want to hear of it.” Desmond clenched his jaw.

He watched his sweet and precious wife revert to her childlike behavior as she took flight. She tripped on the top step and he started up, except she righted herself and dashed down the hall. The door slammed shut. She tested his patience and he’d lost. If she ever talked to him again, it would be a miracle.

Silently swearing, he went to his study. From inside his jacket he took out the crushed parchment he’d slept with and threw it against the wall. Burying his fingers into his hair, he could have pulled out every strand in frustration. That his plans were still on course didn’t take away from the guilt he felt for marrying a beautiful and sensitive woman for the wrong reason.

Desmond picked up a decanter of their best wine. Her father was a drunk and his father was a drunk. If he became a drunk as well, would his children also be ones? Did he even want children?

* * *

Ainsley felt the world closing in on her. What she asked of the marquess wasn’t too much. He could still attend the parties now that he’d married a Delacorte. His prior compassion and gentleness had given her the confidence to beg him not to make her go. His sudden indifference to her feelings forced her to retreat in humiliation.

How unladylike, her mother would say. It's quite typical of Ainsley, Rowena would scoff. What would the people at the gala say? Run and hide rabbit, run and hide.

She no more wanted to be quietly unobtrusive than Desmond wanted her to be. Her desire was to have him like her and feel safe with her loyalty.

Ainsley readied herself, barely using a quarter of the hour Lord Dunsmore had given her to get ready. With her courage bolstered by the determination to do more to please her new husband, she went in search of him. She stopped at the entrance of the study, which a servant had pointed out to her.

Ainsley waited, rethinking her reason for confronting Desmond. She had fled him like a child before and she didn't want to repeat that childishness. Desmond had ordered her to be mistress of his home. She didn't know how hard or how easy the task would be, but she desperately wanted to try.

"Lady Dunsmore," she whispered to herself.

Her name had power. The wife of a marquess meant no one could treat her as a child.

She took a deep breath as she stepped forward with the aim to grow up and out of her fears, and not be looked upon as someone inconsequential.

Ainsley jumped as a glass shattered on the wall and a red stain splattered the white plaster like some painter's reckless creation.

"I can get away with tantrums because I'm young." She spoke with force to make her voice normal.

Desmond turned a confused stare her way.

"But you, m'lord, will only be questioned as to whether you have all your senses."

"Ah, my quiet little flower!" his voice boomed.

She looked at the decanter in his hand. "My things are ready," she announced.

“How? You were in bed only a short time ago.”

“I have not unpacked my trunk since you brought me here. It is not a large one, therefore I will take all that I own with me,” she answered. He’d not know she and Lydia had packed it quickly.

“Very efficient, or maybe you stay packed in case you need to flee, not a room, but a whole estate.”

“I’ll not run away from my duties as your wife. I’m going to try my best to respect my title, the Marchioness of Dunsmore.”

Desmond laughed and she stood silent, waiting for his rudeness to pass.

“Maybe someone forgot to tell you”—he gulped down all the wine in his glass—“I despise being called the Marquess of Dunsmore and I forbid you to call yourself the Marchioness of Dunsmore.”

He seemed wickedly pleased with his statement. Ainsley’s mouth opened. Not a sound came out. Not a squeak of astonishment, nor a cry to stop him from being mean. She couldn’t even gasp to prove how shocked she was by his comment.

“Why?” She finally managed the question. “Why would you dismiss something as important as your title?”

“Ah, the answer many a peer has asked and I have not answered. It’s my business and no one else’s. Not Lord Harlan’s, not Lady Edwina’s and not my grandfather’s. If the Duke of Berkenshire could not get me to explain, neither shall you.” He took a long swig from the decanter. “You are even less of nothing to me than they are.”

Ainsley’s lungs filled with mortification and anger.

“I hate you,” she said without blinking or turning from him. “I hate that you think you have to hide things from even me when I can hardly speak to anyone. You have no reason to be vicious. You expect me to run and hide, but it’s the public that frightens me. It’s the cruelty of words I dread most, but since I can’t avoid them from you, then I have no need to find an empty room.”

Tears built behind her burning eyelids and she flat-out refused to show how deeply he had touched her spirit, giving him the power to

shatter it at the same time. Each kind word from him bespoke love to her aching heart. Now that he had a ribbon of tenderness bound around her very soul, she didn't know what to do to prevent him from hurting her.

"Leave me." He waved a hand and the simple gesture unleashed all the fire in her soul.

"Leave!" he snapped when she didn't move.

Ainsley jumped. However, she didn't run as he expected. She stood for one solid, soundless minute staring him in the eye until he wheeled about to face the window.

"Forgive my intrusion, Lord Dunsmore." She bowed her head when he glanced back at her. "I'll take my leave from you now and wait in my room until you give orders for our departure."

Her voice didn't waver. Then she backed out of the room as if she were a servant. She left him to stew with his own miserable temper.

"Lady Dunsmore, is everything all right?" Lady Edwina approached.

"Yes and please, won't you call me Ainsley?"

"I heard yelling. My brother is in a snit, isn't he?" She frowned. "I was hoping to ask him again if I could go."

"Now isn't a good time, I'm afraid. Maybe if you wait until we're ready to... No, why don't you pack and I'll speak to him for you."

"Oh, would you!" Edwina hugged her. "Thank you so much."

"He hasn't said yes, yet."

"He'll do whatever you ask, I'm sure, simply because you're new here. At first, his response will be no, but keep asking until he says yes."

"Why would he change his mind?"

"Because his manners will dictate he compromise with you."

"If I weren't his wife that might be so, except..." She looked to the door opening behind her.

"Edwina, come in here," Desmond directed without looking at either of them.

Ainsley couldn't move. Lord Dunsmore had heard the conversation between her and his sister. The door clicked shut and she waited. It

wasn't long until the door swung open. She readied to console Edwina. Desmond was being a brute and she'd...she'd... But what was this? Edwina was smiling.

"Oh, Lady Dunsmore, is it not the most wonderful thing? Desmond said I can go with you and Harlan. I never really believed he'd change his mind, but he has. Finally, instead of getting second-hand information, I'm allowed to be a part of the beau monde." She danced around. "He says it's about time I was presented at court."

Ainsley's mouth hung open as Edwina pranced away, jabbering about double-checking everything she had packed in hope of this moment.

"You are to keep an eye on her," Desmond said from behind.

Ainsley nodded, refusing to look back. He walked past her and she took note of his strides, the shape of his jacket, snug and fitted to his waist, wide at his shoulders. She found pride in the fact she had a handsome husband.

"M'lady." Lord Harlan appeared. "Forgive our lack of courtesies, but I am your husband's brother, Lord Harlan Rawlington." He wrapped her hand in the crook of his elbow.

"I know." She smiled. "It has been an eventful few days, Lord Harlan. I'll not think on anything other than the next minute."

She used the lie as a shield. The last thing she wanted was sympathy or apologies for the shabby way in which she had been ushered into her new home.

"Des said he had some important business to attend to and he went on ahead." Lord Harlan coughed a little. "Of course, he would have discussed this with me after he had informed you."

He led her to the foyer where Lydia waited with her shawl. Edwina was already bouncing about, full of giggles and smiles as if she were a child. Ainsley envied the ease with which Edwina could display her exuberance.

A servant opened the door and fresh air from outside swept over her hot face. She stepped into the coach and sat next to Lady Edwina. Her sister-in-law wore the biggest of smiles. Ainsley liked the girl and thought

it good to have her along. At least Lord Dunsmore's upset didn't affect everyone.

"You know you are a marchioness even if Desmond refuses to use the title of marquess. He can't stop you from your right to be addressed as such," Edwina blurted during a lull in the conversation about her and suitors.

"My sister has no manners when it comes to holding her tongue, m'lady." Harlan apologized for Edwina's bluntness.

"Let her speak her mind now, while she's allowed," Ainsley replied.

Edwina smiled.

"For once married, her husband will dictate what she may and may not say." And that, Ainsley thought, was from her newly acquired experience. "If it's not too much to ask, could you tell me why he doesn't want the title?"

"Because of an argument he had with our father a long time ago. The exact details are not known," Edwina replied. "Because Desmond won't tell us."

Harlan nodded in agreement. Ainsley felt a bond with his sad look and understood well the subject of dead fathers.

"At the dinner party this evening, do you look forward to dancing, Lady Dunsmore?" Harlan smiled warmly.

Ainsley liked that he did not let silence linger or unpleasant thoughts go on too long.

"I don't know. I'm inexperienced. Before we went to France I did little socially, unless required."

"Lady Dunsmore is shy, Harlan. Do not pressure her into uncomfortable areas of conversation," Edwina chastised.

"Lady Dunsmore, it would be my honor to be your shield this evening whenever you feel a need to...blend in."

"You mean hide." She gave a light laugh. "Thank you, and as there are very few people I know, you may find me a constant guest of your coattails."

"Then won't I be the lucky deuce tonight," he chuckled and patted Edwina's leg. "And you, dear sister, might want to try a hand at not being outspoken. Men will run for cover if they can't get a word in edgewise."

The journey went well. It was pleasant and Ainsley liked Edwina and Harlan immensely. Before she knew it, she stood in the house in London. She hadn't thought about Margaret's banishment until she saw the woman filling the parlor doorway with her size.

"Lord Dunsmore is in his room, m'lady. I will show you to yours." She breezed past and ascended the staircase without looking to see if Ainsley followed.

"I don't know Lord Dunsmore's reasons for sending you off from Dunsmore Manor, but if you wish to return there, I will ask that you do."

"I'll do as the marquess wishes, m'lady."

"Well, as long as you understand I was extremely nervous upon my arrival and I did not ever hint that I didn't want you there. I only wanted to be alone to gather my thoughts."

"Yes, m'lady. The lord sent me here to ready the house for your stay."

"I'm sorry. I assumed because—"

"Is there anything else, m'lady?"

"When my trunk is brought up, I'd like the white silk dress to be aired and freshened."

How she sounded like her mother just then. Was that what marriage was, a transition into confidence? Or maybe it was her need to please everyone. No one had ever looked at her with a chance she might be capable of thought. Now everything involved it. She would show Desmond he had married someone of substance, instead of a pale shadow who pressed herself behind doors and hid in empty rooms. If nothing else, she would act as no theatrical person could.

"Yes, m'lady."

Ainsley looked at the only other door in the room. Would it lead to her husband's bedchamber? She waited until Margaret had left before she walked over to turn the knob. Inside the dressing room, she walked

to the next door. She reached for the knob. Then she decided it would be more proper to knock. With a tight fist, she held it ready at the door. Voices inside prevented her from proceeding.

Ainsley pressed her ear to the door.

"You should have come in the coach with your wife, Des. She's going to know something's up if you avoid her."

"My wife is afraid of her own shadow, Harlan. She'll not get in the way. Besides, what she knows will not interfere with what I have to do. She's a convenience to my plans and nothing more. When all is done, maybe I'll divorce her. Want a wife? Here, take mine."

"You know Lady Shelby will be there tonight. It's heard tell she had her heart set on being Lady Dunsmore."

"There's nothing I can do about that now. It's bad luck all around that we do not get to choose whom we love and whom we marry. The duke was right. This was a perfect scheme to get back into the Prince Regent's good graces. Only what Grandfather or even you don't know is I've taken things a step further."

"What?"

"Sorry, but this is information I play close to my heart."

Chapter Eleven

Desmond opened the door to his dressing room to retrieve fresh clothes. His wife stumbled back into her own room.

"I was just seeing where... I wanted to speak to you about... I needed to know..." Each sentence faltered and failed to come to completion. She had heard enough to make her more nervous than usual.

"We haven't all night. What is it you wanted?"

She crunched the blue muslin in her fists and turned away. "It is difficult enough to be a wife without knowing what to do. It is worse that you didn't want a wife, but needed one for a plot against a cousin I don't know. Nevertheless, I thought we had an understanding. Maybe if you explain what I've done to offend you, m'lord?"

Her words tore at his heart. She had overheard and it wasn't the time to correct his braggart conversation with Harlan. Yet, how could he continue his scheme without hurting her?

"You've done nothing wrong, Ainsley." He put his hands lightly on her small shoulders and felt her contract from his touch.

He went back to his room and closed the door between them. Now he was the one running to hide. She shamed him with those beautiful blue eyes waiting for him to make things right and he couldn't. He had used her appallingly—letting her believe the worst. Nevertheless, he couldn't look for redemption until he had accomplished what he'd started.

Agitated, Desmond stood while his manservant straightened the folds in his cravat.

"Lord Dunsmore is nervous about tonight?" Bertram smirked.

Desmond glared. "Yes."

“Lady Dunsmore is nervous as well, I assume.”

“Extremely.”

“Then might I suggest you show her a little more calmness or she may—”

“Scamper away like a mouse,” Desmond finished. “That’s what worries me. Her sister would have been a better choice for this evening. She had no trouble defying her mother.”

“I do not know Lady Dunsmore’s sister, m’lord. However, I don’t think I’ve ever seen a single one of your...” He coughed to clear his throat. “I’ve never seen a lady you entertained look at you the way Lady Dunsmore does.”

“You mean contempt, loathing and pure hatred?” Desmond turned at Bertram’s motioning hand.

“No, m’lord.” He brushed the sleeves and back of the velvet jacket with a small whisked brush. “Infatuation.”

“I thought so, too, until I hurt her. I have deflated all her hopes of me being as ideal a husband as she believed she might have.”

“Poppyclock, m’lord. You’ve been the beau ideal and every lady in England knows it. Your wife is a lucky woman to have you for a husband.”

“It’s time for me to go.” Desmond frowned at the reflection in the cheval mirror.

He saw a young, attractive man with a rotten heart. He whirled away and took long strides to get out of sight of himself.

Ainsley surprised him by already waiting downstairs with the others. He wanted her to dress in her finest gown and he couldn’t have chosen anything better than what she wore.

“You have everyone scurrying about to get ready and then you are last to join us,” his sister complained. “Even Lady Dunsmore, as tired as she must be from her travels, has been left to stand here for five minutes.”

“Lady Edwina exaggerates, m’lord. I’ve just come down,” Ainsley said.

Desmond took Ainsley's wrap from the servant by the door and placed it around her shoulders. "Forgive my delay." He squeezed her shoulders once before shifting to her side and holding his arm up for her to take.

"There's nothing to forgive, m'lord," she replied curtly.

* * *

The ride in the coach hung with an air of tension. Lady Edwina did not express her exuberance as she had on their journey to London. The anticipation had finally been dampened by reality. They were going to be received by the Prince Regent. Harlan respectfully abstained from conversation and watched the passing buildings. Desmond did the same and she watched him. What was his mission? She had picked apart the conversation and it gave clues, but they were obscure.

When the coach stopped and Desmond got out, she realized she'd not given any consideration as to where they were. The palace, grander than anything she'd ever seen, stood like a treasure chest. The jewels inside were an extended family, people who descended from the same line she had, and yet, she didn't feel as if she belonged.

Once their cloaks were taken away, Ainsley placed her hand on the arm Desmond offered. He led her to the main ballroom. Behind them, she watched Harlan and Edwina pause at the archway.

Ainsley's grip clenched on Desmond's jacket sleeve and she was ever so grateful for his other hand to cover her nervous fingers as she and Desmond were announced to a room full of people.

"The Most Honorable, The Marquess of Dunsmore and his wife, The Most Honorable, The Marchioness of Dunsmore."

She tried not to look impressed by the room, the beauty of the people and the monumental moment. To meet the prince would be a humbling experience. Maybe if she'd been brought up in the affairs of the court, she'd not feel as if she'd just stepped into a fairytale.

"Isn't this exciting, Lady Dunsmore?" Edwina squeezed her arm and moved to give the same comment to others she knew.

"Nervous, m'lady?" Desmond put a hand lightly to her back.

She liked the way he made her feel desired.

"No, should I be?" Where she got the nerve sometimes, she couldn't be sure.

Desmond's little chuckle gave away his disbelief.

"Make way for His Royal Highness, Prince George." The trumpeter sounded the arrival of the host and everyone turned.

Ainsley breathed easier. No one would look at her and her husband as the throng parted for the Prince Regent. She watched him strut into the room with an airy dignity that put forth he was better than everyone.

Lords bowed, ladies curtsied and then he stopped only feet from her and bent to put a hand under Edwina's chin.

"Very pretty indeed," he commented.

Ainsley watched his satin slippers. A bit ostentatious for a man, however, with his other fine garments of bright silk, he pulled off wearing them quite nicely.

"And this angel can't be your wife, Dunsmore?"

Ainsley lifted her head to look at the prince.

"Yes, Your Highness," Desmond answered. "May I present your distant cousin, the Marchioness of Dunsmore."

Desmond said it proudly and Ainsley's gaze strayed toward him. A twinkle of happiness in his green eyes made her believe he meant it.

"Your Highness," Ainsley spoke softly, wishing he'd move away and not try to get her to say more.

"Well, we will need to get acquainted with each other better, Lady Dunsmore. I do enjoy knowing what my family members are up to, what little plots and schemes they are devising." He chuckled.

The muscles in Desmond's arm contracted under her fingers. She, too, wanted to know the very same thing as the prince. The fact Desmond couldn't share didn't make her any less sensitive to his

tension. When she put her other hand on his arm, he covered her fingers with what she felt was a thankful pat.

“Yes, Your Highness,” she murmured.

Prince George moved on and eventually settled in a red velvet chair on the dais where he observed his guests. His gaze followed her for a long time and she speculated idle curiosity got the better of him.

A tall, gray-haired man approached and claimed her attention.

“You have done well, Desmond,” the older gentleman commented.

“Thank you, Your Grace. May I present Lady Dunsmore.” Desmond let go of Ainsley’s elbow. “Lady Dunsmore, this is the Duke of Berkenshire.”

She looked at the duke with a nervous distrust. Her instincts told her Desmond would do his grandfather’s bidding out of family loyalty.

“Your Grace.” She curtsied.

Her stomach rumbled and she assumed it was caused by nerves. While shyness plagued her, she seldom reached the point of physical discomfort. Nonetheless, too many strangers looked at her with wonder, with awe and with question.

“It is with a most humble pardon I beg you to excuse me.” She twisted from them and hurried through the crowd.

Desmond soon caught up to her and gripped her elbow. “What do you think you’re doing running away when I’ve introduced you to the duke?”

He led her to a pantry.

“You have insulted him,” he scolded.

“Who am I to mean so much to anyone?” She shook free of his hold. “I made apologies the best I knew how.”

She held her stomach as the onslaught of her stress-related stomach cramps increased with Desmond’s anger.

“I want you to come back and make further apologies,” he demanded.

“I will, I promise, but...”

She spun around and grabbed a large pot on the bottom shelf. With a wrenching sound, she dropped to her knees and heaved until what churned in her stomach spewed into the black kettle.

Desmond came down beside her and dabbed at the corners of her mouth with an embroidered silk handkerchief.

"I'm sorry. I should have foreseen this with your nature." His apologetic and consoling tone didn't help much with her embarrassment.

If she shrank to the size of a bug, she'd skitter under the baseboard along the wall to avoid his annoyance and his pity.

"Finished?" he asked when she sat back on her heels.

Ainsley hiccupped a small sob.

"Let's see." With tender swipes of the silk over her lips and across her chin, he leaned away, examining her face. "At least you haven't caked an exorbitant amount of Spanish powder on your face."

"I'm sorry."

"You're too beautiful to have all these perfumed powders on your face." He gave the compliment so offhandedly as he brushed her cheeks and jaw with two fingers.

"You think I'm beautiful?"

"Extremely and I hate that you would hide it." He rubbed at her face again, harder and more thoroughly. "That's better."

"I should say I must not have anything left." She touched her inflamed skin.

"There isn't as far as I can see."

"I just thought...well I'm married now and most married women..."

"I'd prefer you didn't, but do as suits you." He felt his pockets and pulled a piece of candy out. "Open." He put it to her lips. "You suck on this awhile and the sourness will go away. It might help prevent another attack. Did you eat before we left Dunsmore or after we arrived at the house here in London? I'd say not."

She took his hand and let him help her up. "I'm sorry to have embarrassed you in front of the duke."

“It’s not your fault and it was boorish of me not to remember your affliction with meeting strangers. Maybe the next time you could hide behind me as if I were a door, instead of bolting from the room.”

Ainsley lifted her lashes to look up to him. Yes, he could hide her, but how would he explain that his wife was so frightfully bashful she wished to climb in his pocket?

“You look beautiful tonight.” He held her chin. “Have I told you that yet?”

Ainsley shook her head and watched his mouth. His tongue licked over his lips. She gulped and the piece of peppermint candy slid down her throat.

Chapter Twelve

Ainsley had a way of making the idea of kissing a major event, instead of a prelude to the wedding night they had yet to share. Desmond folded his hand around her neck. He didn't forget where they were. Instead, he chose to ignore the music and chatter outside the pantry.

He wanted to touch her smooth skin and taste her sweet breasts.

"M'lord, is something wrong?"

Her fingers tapped against the front of his jacket. He didn't like that she was nervous. Her lips parted and the tip of her tongue slid along the edge of her teeth. He lowered his head and her mouth sought his for the first time.

The candy masked some of the sourness of her breath, but he was reminded of her upset stomach and drew away.

"Do you feel all right...I mean right now?" Even her sickness couldn't stop his attraction to her.

"Much better. Sometimes a crowd can be overwhelming."

He resumed the kiss and her lips glided delicately over his. She shuffled closer, between his parted legs and pressed her hip into his groin. He held back from rubbing against her.

"I like kissing you, m'lord."

"I like when you say my name while doing so." He stroked the pulse in her neck.

"Desmond, please have patience with me."

"If it seems I don't at times, will you not take it personally?"

"I don't understand."

He turned her in his arms and kissed the side of her neck.

"It'll never be you I'm angry with. Never."

Her head dropped away and his mouth fit to the slender corded muscle from neck to shoulder.

"You don't know that, not for sure. I may make an awful mistake one day."

His hand held the curve of her breast and her hand held his. Gentle caresses over the back of his knuckles encouraged him to test the limits of her gown.

"I want to touch you." He inched the gown up her leg.

"Here?" She tried to stop him. "We're in the pantry, someone could come."

Desmond found the crotch of her underpants already wet.

"M'lord." She moved, not to get away, but to accommodate the width of his hand.

"You are a morsel for savoring." He kissed her cheek. "It is a very good thing you're my wife."

"Oh?"

"Do not think I won't enjoy every minute I can have with you."

"Like a possession?"

"Like a lover," he sighed against the damp curve of her jaw. "You have it in your power to possess me, Ainsley."

"I would never be as bold as to believe I could."

He massaged the ringlets covering the entrance to her sex and it produced a whimper from her.

"You don't have a clue as to how desirable you are, do you?" He played with the hood of her clit.

She squirmed without protest. Her head turned sideways to hide her face with its rosy blush.

"Look at me, my Lady Dunsmore. I want to see your eyes."

Everything, right down to her bashfulness, teased him with wonderful delight. He never thought he'd care to hold a woman untouched by a man. But every time she spoke, she created exquisite sensations that made him feel emotionally closer to her.

"Desmond, please, oh please, don't do this here." She shuddered and her nails dug into his sleeve.

Her legs trembled, her bottom pressed tighter to his erection. She wiggled against all the right places and he made her squirm more with each plunge of his finger.

She tensed as he stroked deeper. Her virginity intact, he kept a leash on the reaches he sought. The hymen would be his ultimate goal and pleasure, but it would come later, when he held her tight beneath him.

"Oh God, Desmond, please stop." She struggled in his arms.

He kissed her and captured the reverberating sounds of her panted cries forced from her by an intense orgasm. Her slender frame fit to him. Each contour complimented his as if they were pieces of a puzzle someone put together.

He held her face and pressed his kiss deeper. She slumped against him in whimpers. Her languid body drooped in his hold. Retrieving the handkerchief he had used on her face, he took the clean side and wiped the silk between her legs. Her muscles quivered with each pass over the sensitive area.

"Desmond!" She tried to close her legs.

He wouldn't let her walk from the room feeling uncomfortable with the excessive fluids running down the inside of her thighs.

She tried to back away from the ticklish brush of cloth on her dampened ringlets. Another minute of her bottom wriggling over his cock and he would explode. He'd have a large wet spot on his trousers and worse discomfort than Ainsley.

"Hold still," he ordered and stopped touching her.

He hugged her and let his mind wander to the people beyond the paneled door. She shivered and he squeezed her to him while resting his cheek on top her auburn curls.

"I'm sorry." She trembled. "I can't stop shaking."

"You will."

He inhaled the perfume from her hair. Tugging her around, he wished they were in their room for the night. Her sex had the enticing scent of the rose water that she had bathed in before their journey.

"Desmond, I can't go back out there. People will know what you did to me."

"You're my wife. My sweet, charming wife and if we had hours, I'd do more to pleasure your body than you could ever imagine." He kissed her forehead. "You were pleased, were you not?"

She nodded quickly.

"Good, because later"—he picked up her chin—"I want to make love to you for a very long time and it would be nice to have you enjoy my touch."

"Oh, I do!"

Desmond grinned at the way the color heightened in her cheeks and she lowered her lashes.

Mortified by the intimate moment with Desmond, Ainsley felt awkward walking out of the pantry. The tension from her concern someone would guess what she'd been doing eased when he led her to where Edwina stood. Surrounded by men as if they were honeybees ready to drink her sweet nectar, Edwina was the center of attention and that suited Ainsley.

Edwina didn't take notice of her or Desmond right away. Her silky black hair swished back and forth as she talked rapidly, trying to captivate her audience of admirers, but Desmond's intense stare eventually brought his sister's gaze around to him.

Suddenly, Edwina stopped talking. "Lord Dunsmore." She nodded toward him.

He gave her a bow. "Don't let me interrupt."

Edwina's face wrinkled with annoyance and then smoothed back into a happy expression as she resumed speaking to the man on the other side of her.

"She doesn't want you close by." Ainsley tried to draw Desmond away.

"I know. That's why I am."

"Leave her room to breathe. I don't think standing somewhere other than alongside her would make her any less chaperoned by you."

"I was just proving a point. She tends to get too familiar with people. I want her to tone down her forwardness."

"She's young and outgoing."

"You're young and show ten times the maturity she does."

A laugh burst from her. "I'm sorry, but even I can see my hiding is more childish than mature."

Something across the room caught his attention and his gaze strayed. "Excuse me for a moment. Stay here with Edwina."

He hurried away before she could say a word. Her heart gave a flutter. His magnificent gait bespoke confidence and she wished she had his strength of character in public. She lost sight of him as he passed through the crowd.

"Lady Dunsmore has recently come from France," Lady Edwina noted. "Maybe she could tell you how goes the—"

Before Edwina finished her sentence, a call to dinner was announced. Ainsley found Harlan ready to offer his arm and she took it with gratitude.

"I saw he deserted you," he said. "I'd be happy to escort you to the dining room."

"Thank you, m'lord."

"It's Harlan to you, m'lady." He patted her hand.

She smiled and gave his arm a squeeze. Harlan hadn't ever displayed an expression of sadness. His gaiety for the short time she had known

him made her feel strangely close to him. Edwina too, had treated her as if they had always been friends. They were comfortable to be around.

“Thank you, Harlan,” she whispered. “You make me feel at ease.”

“And Desmond doesn’t?” He frowned.

“Oh no, I didn’t mean it like that.”

He leaned over and kissed her cheek. “He’s an ogre at times, but you’ll get use to it.”

Ainsley blushed. Harlan’s inappropriate affection was unexpected, but as she watched him wave and greet a passerby, she accepted his kiss as a simple friendly quirk in his behavior.

While Harlan talked to someone who stood near them, she glanced around the room for Desmond. When she spotted him, his glare was coldly disturbing. Had he misinterpreted Harlan’s kiss?

Chapter Thirteen

Desmond watched Ainsley with Harlan. They were enjoying the evening and he had to deal with Nellie. If he didn't know his brother as well as he did, he might have been angered by the kiss Harlan gave Ainsley. However, the only jealousy that stirred within him was the way everyone was happy while he had too many complications in his life.

Nellie was the last person he wanted to see when she brazenly waved him away from Ainsley. Nevertheless, he had to talk to her and get the last piece of information about the Napoleon plan.

"Come, Desmond, you seem distracted." Nellie tugged on his arm.

"This could have waited," he muttered.

"Why, darling, are you not happy to see me? Afraid your little wife will think it in poor taste for you to be seen in public with your mistress?"

"She doesn't know about you."

"Men." She sighed. "You have no clue as to what a woman can intuitively know about another woman."

"What's that suppose to mean?" He shifted his gaze from Ainsley to Nellie.

"You, standing here with me, has given your wife enough reason to suspect there is something between us."

"It's been over for a long time. Besides, she knows I'm no saint."

"Ravaged your wife beyond her dreams, have you?" She pouted and poked his bottom lip. "You liked all the pleasures I offered not so long ago."

"What is it you'd like to tell me?"

He folded his arms to keep Nellie from pressing in close. She did not have enough class to restrain her voracious sexual appetite and keep from throwing herself at him. He had witnessed her moods, her carnal lusts and he had enjoyed her bestial behavior...at one time.

"I have a letter for you to deliver to our friends. It details Napoleon's plans, his departure, arrival and—"

"Then give it to me." He held out his hand, anxious to have the evidence safely in his possession.

"Why, sugarplum, I haven't got it on me. Do you know how dangerous that would be, if someone was to find it on my person?"

"Then take me to where you do have it." He gripped her arm to force her and she wrenched free.

"Not so damn fast, Desmond. People prying into our association may be watching and I can't take a chance that there's a traitor among our colleagues."

"Then when?"

"Later, darling, much later, when your wife has toddled off to bed." She smiled at him wickedly. "Shall we go into supper now? I see your brother has taken charge of your wife."

Desmond took her arm and nearly dragged her to the dining hall. He hadn't intended to desert Ainsley. Still, Harlan appeared to be handling everything well by taking care of her.

"Don't they make a darling pair," Nellie laughed. "Much closer in age than you and she, aren't they? Maybe they have something in common, a hobby or...well, you know what I mean. No one can ever be sure when an attraction will develop."

"I trust Harlan with my wife. If you think angering me will put you in my good graces, then you've learned nothing over the years of our acquaintance."

"You know, Desmond, you used to be fun. I pity your poor bride if this is the dull attitude you have with her. It wouldn't be a wonder if she did stray from your bed."

He looked at Ainsley with Harlan. How could he not trust her?

"Sit." He pulled a chair out, annoyed at having let Nellie rattle his thoughts.

* * *

Ainsley held Harlan's arm, finding him the savior she needed when the prince looked her way as they neared the dining table.

"Cousin!" the prince called. "Come, Lady Dunsmore. Sit here to my right where I can pry into all your family secrets during our meal."

Ainsley looked about for Desmond. Her heart beat thunderously, distraught that he would leave her on her own. Lord Harlan's arm circled her waist and she burrowed into the niche.

"She would be delighted, Your Highness," Harlan answered for her and guided her to the chair.

"You'll stay with me?" she whispered.

"But of course." Harlan moved to the chair alongside hers.

Thank you, she mouthed to him and lowered onto the edge of the seat as a footman behind the chair slid it under her.

Desmond appeared right after she and Lord Harlan were settled. He sat on the opposite side of the massive table and several places down. The arrangement made his location too far to speak to him or hear what he might say to others. She accepted his calming smile, but she didn't understand his narrowed gaze at his brother.

She sighed softly and looked at the food placed before her. Bolstering her waning courage to do for herself, she stared at the meal. Desmond wouldn't be there to protect her or guide her words and she couldn't disappoint him. Yet, nervousness made the very idea of eating, a distasteful option. Instead of offending anyone, she moved the food around on her gold-rimmed plate without putting anything in her mouth.

Servants bustled about in a hurry to wait on everyone. When one course was completed, the plate vanished and another took its place.

Ainsley had an array of delicacies placed under her nose. The roast goose smelled atrocious. Her stomach rumbled and she looked toward Desmond. If she jumped from the table and hurried away, he would understand, but he would also be disappointed.

"I understand the duchess is residing in France at the present," the prince commented and stuffed a large piece of potato in his mouth. "Some business of your estate falling into the hands of your uncle?"

His fork waved in the air as he spoke.

"My father and my brothers died. My uncle inherited the title of duke."

"Yes, a nasty bit of circumstances. Your uncle should have at least kept you in his household. Though that would be awkward, since I understand your father and he had somewhat of a falling out. I found it quite surprising the Duke of Berkenshire would welcome a match between you and his grandson."

"It surprises me no less, Your Highness."

"But grateful to have redeemed your family, I daresay," he chuckled. "This must have put the very feather in your mother's hat to get her daughter an offer."

"She is well pleased."

Ainsley didn't like his lack of sympathy for her family.

"You have an older sister. Why was she not the first choice?"

"She is married, Your Highness. A French baron."

"And his name?"

"Edgar LeBonnet."

"Never heard of him. You would do well to keep from visiting France at this time though. Nevertheless, you may convey good wishes to your sister and inform her that she and her husband would be a welcome addition to England."

"Thank you, Your Highness. I will pass on that kindness to them." She had no idea when, not having a clue as to where Rowena had disappeared to.

The prince turned to the gentleman on his other side and Ainsley took her thoughts to Desmond. His engagement in a deep conversation with the lady next to him acquired her notice. Frequently, his head bowed toward the woman whose hand rested on his arm. Ainsley suspected the beautiful woman to be the Lady Shelby that Harlan had mentioned.

Ainsley's stomach twisted into knots. The way the lady pawed Desmond sparked resentment toward them for flaunting an intimate liaison.

The prince made small talk the rest of the meal and Ainsley waited out the long four hours in complete boredom. When the prince finally called it to an end, she practically jumped from her tufted chair.

"Lady Dunsmore." The prince captured her arm before she could get away. "May I introduce Lord Frazier? He has been admiring your beauty all evening and I have proudly explained you are a distant cousin."

"Lord Frazier." She smiled, made uneasy by the man's stare.

His one blue eye and one green eye strangely attracted her attention. His long bulbous nose was another oddity.

"I understand your mother is the Duchess of Delacorte?" He leered, staring down into the cleavage of her gown.

"Yes," she answered hoarsely.

"Ah, so your beauty comes from that charming woman. We were acquainted in the day. I mean to say, before she married your father." His tone had a pitying attitude she didn't like.

Ainsley wrinkled her nose and stepped back. Her heel came down on Lord Harlan's toe and she shifted off, surprised he said nothing.

"It must be nice having such a divine creature living in your house, Lord Harlan."

"I reside in her house, Lord Frazier. But yes, Lady Dunsmore is a remarkable woman and a joy to be around."

Ainsley felt her cheeks flush with heat. She appreciated Harlan standing sentry over her wellbeing. Being surrounded by men made her

feel cornered and caused her to suffer another bout of a nervous stomach.

Harlan put his hands on her hips and steered her away. While it was a breach in public etiquette, it also prevented her from fleeing.

"Excuse us." He uttered the departing phrase while the prince and baron debated something she didn't follow.

Ainsley let him direct her to a quieter area of the ballroom.

"You're shaking," he said.

"I can't help it."

"No matter." He rubbed his hand at her side. "As my new sister, I will protect you from the vultures."

"I could get to like you very much, Lord Harlan. Rescuing me from that man is most noble of you. He's a bit—"

"Lecherous is the word. He's had too many affairs with married women. Desmond would think it best if you were not seen talking to him. That is, if you don't want your name thrown into his little stewpot of past private parties."

She looked over at the baron. When he winked, she pretended not to notice.

"Why would he be seated close to the prince?"

"Birds of a feather, m'lady. The prince has been known to have his own good times. No one would come right out and accuse him, but the rumors are rampant. Des nor I want you part of those tales, whether lies or not." He picked up her hand and kissed her knuckles. "Shall we dance?"

"I'm not very good."

"How absurd, to even think it. You are a graceful angel who puts the rest of us to shame."

He led her through the doorway and into the ballroom where the music played.

"Lord Harlan, I can't." She backed away.

"You will and you need to."

“No, please.” She shook her head.

On the far side of the room, Desmond caught her attention. He stood with the woman from the table and they were deep in conversation. They gazed at one another with charged emotion.

She wanted to run—hide from the public mockery of her marriage and she cringed at the imaginary laughter filling her head.

“Lady Dunsmore?” Harlan touched her arm.

He talked, but she couldn’t hear. Blood rushed through her veins. The pressure grew to a level she believed would make her head explode.

“Ainsley.” He held both her arms.

She blinked and stared at him.

“What’s wrong?”

She didn’t want to be weak. Harlan had such confidence in her. She wanted to prove to him, to her husband and mostly to herself she could face controversy. Hiding from the truth of Desmond’s affairs would not make his past go away.

Pretend, Ainsley. Pretend he means nothing and maybe it can be so. She looked at Harlan and curtsied for their dance. His smile alleviated her grim mood and she tried to concentrate on only the dance. When he made light of his own misstep, she giggled and teased as if he were a true brother, as if they had been friends forever. She needed an ally in the house of Rawlington because it looked far from possible that it would be her husband.

Chapter Fourteen

Desmond discreetly watched Ainsley from the sidelines. Where his brother did the job of protecting Ainsley, Desmond wished to take over. He had given Lady Shelby as much of his time as he could to satisfy her.

“If your wife’s stare could kill, I might be worried,” Nellie commented.

“She’s not taken any notice of you.”

“Come now, Desmond. Is she that slow-witted?”

He watched and there, in a fleeting glance when Ainsley turned, her gaze swept over Nellie and connected with his. The hurt was evident and Desmond’s chest tightened. Hours had passed since he had last spoken to Ainsley. When the music ended he set aside the glass in his hand and took long strides to get to her.

“M’lady?” He bowed and offered his hand.

Ainsley accepted.

They moved about the room, their gaze on everything but each other. It was awkward and disheartening not to be able to talk to her.

“I’m tired, m’lord. Do you think I might be excused to retire for what night there is left?”

“It is why I’m here.”

She tilted her head and gave him a curious look. In that single moment, he forgot himself and slanted his mouth over hers. Her kiss instantly caused a wave of giggles around them.

“I beg your pardon, m’lady.” He stepped back.

Desmond waited for her to depart. Like fire on her heels, she'd run and it was his fault. He prepared to see his petite flower make a dash out of the room and he couldn't blame her.

"Lady Edwina has been whisked around the room by dozens of eligible men." She moved toward him and took his arm. "I think she is truly having a lovely time tonight."

"L-Lady Edwina?" he stuttered.

"And you knew just the right time to rescue Lord Harlan. I've trampled his toes more times than I can count this evening."

"He doesn't care." He led her out of the ballroom, finding it hard to believe Ainsley hadn't bolted.

"Oh, he wouldn't say he does, but he'll be soaking his sore feet for a week."

"Ainsley?" He grasped her chin between thumb and forefinger. "I'm sorry for making a public scene and I appreciate you trying to rescue me."

"Rescue you?" Her pretty blue eyes grew wide.

"There will be talk."

"I know." She smiled.

"And you don't mind?"

"Can it truly be bad if the talk is of a husband kissing his wife?"

Desmond chuckled and hugged her. "No, I think it a very good thing."

She put her head against his chest. Her fingers entwined with his over his heart.

"Besides, you've saved me on more than one occasion," she spoke softly.

"Only because you have an awful habit, m'lady."

"I do?"

"Yes, a horrendous tendency to maul your clothing."

"Oh my, it's so unconscious I scarcely know I do it." She brushed at the crepe.

“Shall we dance or leave?” He lifted her hand to kiss her palm.

“Dance.” She smiled warmly and it melted his heart.

“It will take some time for us to adjust to our arrangement.”

“I know.”

“I’m not always as irritable as I was in my study. Forgive me when I am?” He pulled her close and kissed the top of her head before the dance parted them.

“I shouldn’t have said I hated you and I’m sorry for that outburst. It was wrong of me to direct all my frustration at you.”

“I don’t think you can ever be wrong, my dear. I said some mighty strong things and provoked you. You just happened to be standing in the wrong place at the right time, or is it the right place at the wrong time?” He laughed. “Well, whatever the case, the next time you hear me swearing, breaking anything or yelling at someone, scamper off to a dark corner.”

Their hands connected with each twirl and he watched the twinkle in her eyes return. A blush tinted her pale complexion. He stood entranced and if someone hadn’t bumped into him, he wouldn’t have realized the music had stopped.

“Would you like to step outside for a breath of fresh air?” He took hold of her arm.

“That would be nice.”

He led her off to a shadowy alcove and out a set of tall glass doors. The empty balcony would be to her liking—an ideal place to hide. Secluded, void of people and fragrant with the rose garden, it also made a perfect location for other things as well.

He watched her inhale the perfumed air and wondered if she wasn’t thinking about the home she’d left in France. Not once had he given her a tour of her new home. It had to be strange for her to be dumped into the big, sprawling mansion without an introduction to the servants. The Dunsmore estate had the best gardens in England and once they returned home, he would show her everything he loved.

“You’re a beautiful woman, Ainsley.” He looked over her porcelain face as if it were the first time he’d seen it.

Brushing the back of his hand across her cheek, he rolled his fingers along the side and cupped her delicate face.

She dropped her gaze and her lashes lifted with a coy, flirtatious flutter he’d never seen before. He witnessed her meekness and then she tossed her inhibitions aside. He needed no words of encouragement as he imprisoned her lips. She responded with a kiss.

Desmond held onto her as he had never held any woman. He’d had desire and passion, but he’d never known how to love.

“Sweet, sweet Ainsley, you’ll never need tutelage in how to kiss me,” he murmured over her parted lips and pulled her close.

Ainsley’s heart rattled inside her ribcage as passion escalated. Desmond’s hand glided over her face, down her neck and circled around to her back. She put aside her worries and suspicions about the woman she had seen him with and the conversation she’d overheard between him and Harlan about Desmond eventually divorcing her. Ainsley didn’t think beyond his kisses on her cheeks and the soft, subtle murmurs teasing her skin as he traveled to her shoulder.

“Desmond, while I’m not complaining about the attention you are giving me, we are only outside the doors of a crowded room and people might see.”

“Are you still worried they’d find it strange of me to kiss my wife?”

“They may gossip that I’m not your wife.”

His gaze wandered to the garden and the moon’s play with shadows. She liked the night and the privacy.

“Quite right, m’lady. We’re not acting as the ton would expect. It would be a more common practice if I were out here wooing my mistress, instead of tarrying with my wife.”

Ainsley looked at the doors behind her and Desmond pulled her tight against him.

"A joke in poor taste is never funny. For the record, I have no mistress, nor shall I ever." He kissed her hairline. "I have you and it is all I should ever hope to need."

"Your words are kind, but I doubt any man has openly admitted to his wife he has a mistress," she argued.

"I can only pray it will not be a long wait before I have your complete trust." He took her back inside.

An opening, even a bad one, presented her with the opportunity to question him. "Who was the lady you were seated next to at supper?"

"Lady Shelby. Forgive me for doing you the disservice of thinking you'd not notice. The liaison between Nellie and I was a long time ago. She would like the situation to change, but it will not and I have told her that."

Ainsley's gaze darted around the room to pick out the threat to her marriage. The woman stood indecently draped over another man's arm. She pawed at his cravat like a strumpet. Ainsley took notice of the man and saw it was Lord Frazier. She shivered to think of the man.

"She married a French viscount, but she is a widow now."

"She's very beautiful. Were you in love with her?"

"Hmmm...not a question you should ask, for there is no delicate way to talk of such a subject."

"We're married, Lord Dunsmore. I hope to come to know you as no one else. Whatever your past indiscretions have been, I'd rather know the truth from the source, instead of rumors from people not privy to all the facts." She looked up at him. "I hide well and keep secrets even better."

"I never loved Nellie. Infatuated, maybe."

"I can understand why. She's very friendly with gentlemen."

"She had me fooled by her modesty at first. Word got to me of other relationships she had and it lowered her quality considerably."

"At dinner...and after, you looked..."

"Bored, trapped and too polite to dismiss her friendship?"

"I was going to say involved."

“No more involved than you were with Lord Frazier ogling you like fresh meat in the butcher-shop window.”

Ainsley giggled. She put her hand up to cover both her laughter and the errant yawn. The evening had been too long. She needed sleep and yet she didn’t want the night to end.

“You’re tired?”

“No. Well, a little.”

“If you wait here, I’ll see to getting you something cool to drink.”

She nodded and watched him work his way through the crowd. Her gaze drifted around to locate Lady Shelby who was not far from where Desmond headed.

“How about another dance?” Harlan caught her by surprise. “Des should be shot for leaving you alone.”

“It’s all right. He went to get me something to drink.”

“A bucket of mud?”

“What was that?” She eyed him curiously, her mind distracted. “What bucket of mud?”

“Nothing, you’re not listening.” He took her arm and pulled her along. “He doesn’t care about her.”

“I wish I believed that.” Her shoulders dropped.

Harlan brushed a lock of hair back. “I’ll prove it to you.”

“How?”

“Let me think on it.”

“Thank you, Harlan.” She kissed his cheek.

“There will be talk if you do that too often.” His hand covers hers on his arm.

“Then my husband and I will have something in common,” she joked.

“And what is that, might I ask?” Desmond’s voice made her turn.

Harlan swaggered around them and grinned. “Lady Dunsmore was just saying how you and she enjoy having a handsome chap like me around.”

Ainsley took the cup from Desmond and sipped the claret. She hid her smile behind the glass.

"Is that right?" Desmond folded his arms over his wide chest.

"Well, I see some people I haven't talked to this evening." Harlan bowed his head. "Good evening, Lady Dunsmore, Lord Dunsmore."

Harlan trotted off. Cheerful, pleasant and sweetly entertaining, he had a way of making her appreciate his open friendship.

"I like him."

"I didn't think you kissed him because you found him distasteful."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that, except he made me feel good." Ainsley set the glass down feeling a tremor shake her fingers.

Desmond took her hand and held it. She thought he might drag her off somewhere to chastise her for the forwardness of her actions. He stood a long time, silent and pensive.

She relaxed under his mindless petting over her knuckles.

"What do you say I take you home now?"

"Whatever you wish, m'lord."

He led her around the people who watched, stared and whispered not so quietly.

"They're jealous you have a husband and he is the one taking you home," Desmond whispered in her ear.

Women appeared to glower with envy. Desmond was bound to her and they knew they had no chance of being his wife, but what of his mistress? How many had he been with and how many would he take over the course of their marriage? He said none. Could she trust that forever?

"Good evening, Lord Dunsmore." A woman planted herself in front of him. "I don't recall you ever attending one of the Prince Regent's galas."

"Lady Dunsmore, this is my cousin, Lady Victoria," Desmond introduced.

"I heard you finally married, Desmond. She's a pretty little thing and much too young to handle you." Lady Victoria pinched Ainsley's cheek.

Ainsley jerked her face out of Lady Victoria's clutches and moved to shield herself behind Desmond's arm.

"She's no more than a child and a timid one at that. What is her background? Where did you find her? I hope not on the streets of London. You do have a rebellious side that besieges our family with scandal," Lady Victoria accused.

Ainsley didn't like the woman's ill manners, which she suspected was a result of drinking too much. It wasn't hard to miss the strong, liquored breath wafting under Ainsley's nose.

"Look at the little mouse. What kind of heirs can you hope to have with such a creature?" Lady Victoria's boisterous laugh turned heads in their direction.

Desmond sighed, indicating he did not find the lady anything more than a lot of hot air.

"You and your own weak blood," she babbled with a growing irritation. "That mother of yours was only the daughter of a baronet, hardly anything more than a commoner herself."

"You have some nerve!" Ainsley said outraged. "Even if my husband's mother was of the lowest class, she would surely have had enough decency not to display public rudeness. I can only believe Lord Dunsmore's mother would have been a kind and loving woman to raise such a man."

"You little guttersnipe. Desmond, have you nothing to say at how your trollop has spoken to me?" Lady Victoria swayed with her words.

Chapter Fifteen

Ainsley covered the subject splendidly and left Desmond speechless. Her timorous nature obviously was not always predominant. Yet, the tenacity that came out of nowhere, faded just as suddenly. He looked around and took note of the people smiling, snickering and enjoying Lady Victoria's public litany of complaints. Meanwhile, Ainsley suffered a huge wave of embarrassment.

She pulled her hand from his gentle hold, and before he could stop her, she hurried away. The crowd parted and closed around her.

"Lady Dunsmore, wait," called his brother.

"Find her," Desmond instructed Harlan.

Desmond grabbed Victoria's upper arms and brought her close to his face. She'd hurt Ainsley needlessly and he shook Victoria with barely a grip on his rage. When she gasped, the strong sour odor of potent liquor on her breath expelled.

"My wife is far better than you, Cousin. Once you sober up you'll see the grave error in your judgment." He leaned down and whispered, "For now, know that I detest the Rawlington name, and more than you, I wish I was not born into this family. I am however, quite fortunate that Ainsley would accept me into hers since she is cousin to the prince."

"She's not!" Victoria staggered back and eyed him with disbelief. "How dare you say such a thing."

Desmond turned her around to face the dais on the far side of the ballroom.

“Go ask him yourself. Tell him why you would insult a member of his family. You were right. I’ve never been to the Prince Regent’s galas. I never would have been invited if it wasn’t for my wife’s family name.”

Desmond left her standing openmouthed and rushed across the room. He met Harlan in the large, ornately decorative entryway.

“Where is she?” Desmond asked.

“I don’t know. I lost sight of her. Vanished without a trace, I’m afraid.” Harlan clapped a hand on Desmond’s shoulder. “Brother, she is a quirky one, but well worth all the effort.”

“Go on back to the party and keep an eye on our sister. Let Edwina wear herself out before bringing her home. This is her first and most important coming out party. I don’t want her screaming at me tomorrow that I cheated her of her time.”

“Where are you going?” Harlan continued to look about.

“Home, I’m tired.” He straightened his cravat and brushed imaginary lint from his coat.

“And what of your wife?”

“She will be going with me.”

Puzzled, Harlan returned to the ballroom. Desmond finished brushing off his sleeves, not letting the sentries guess he’d spied his wife behind the drapes. His heart had pounded with restless worry until he had observed her dainty feet wedged between a statue and a wall. He felt a pitiful sorrow for her affliction and wished he could order the irritable problem away.

“We are alone, m’lady. Shall we go home?” From the corner of his eye, he saw the gold-tasseled curtain move.

Like a silent breeze, she floated to his extended arm and took hold. He led her to the door where he motioned for a servant to bring her cloak and his cape.

“Are you all right?” He helped her with her wrap.

“Yes.”

"It was nice of you to think well of my mother." He led her to the carriage. "I'm not so sure I've inherited any of her fine qualities."

"Lady Victoria had no right to speak of your mother as she did." She took his hand to climb up into the carriage.

"Yes, well, she's miffed at me for rebuffing her advances ever since we were children." He got in the carriage and sat. "She's never been to my liking."

He leaned back, lifting his legs and propping them on the opposite seat. He had the kind of weariness one gets from lack of sleep and a lot of stress. He couldn't even remember how long he and Ainsley had been together.

"Your father must have loved your mother very much."

"Maybe at one time, when she was young and beautiful." Desmond laid his hand in Ainsley's lap. With a gentle and understanding nature, she'd not turn him away from the comfort he sought in her touch.

"Tell me about your father." She lightly traced lines on his skin.

The moon hung low in the sky. The crescent, like a cradle, invited him to close his eyes and enjoy Ainsley's soothing strokes. He heard her yawn and hardly a tug from him brought her head to his shoulder.

"I have kept you awake for practically a week, traveling from place to place." He lifted her fingers to his lips. "You need sleep and so do I. It will be good to lie in a bed."

"Tis true that I'm tired, but you cannot distract me, Lord Dunsmore. You were going to tell me about your father." She slyly pushed the discussion.

"My father was a sot. He drank too heavily to marry any woman higher in station."

"You really don't think he loved her, do you? It's why you did not challenge Lady Victoria's statement. You think your mother was unworthy as well." She bowed her head and fiddled with the fringe on her shawl.

"I think my mother was forced, as you were, into marrying beneath her, not above."

"I was not forced, nor do I feel you are beneath me," she whispered. "I am shy, granted. However, I should like to think if pressured I can act on my own behalf."

"You think this was meant for you, maybe a punishment for being overly bashful?"

"No. I do not feel cheated by fate, m'lord, only bruised by the speed at which everything transpired."

"I'll try not to disappoint you in the future, m'lady."

* * *

Ainsley sat in her room. The familiar nerves twittered inside her like a trapped bird. She had ventured too deep into a conversation with Desmond about idyllic romance. Her marriage had been arranged as if it were a hog someone bought or a dress sold. Lord Dunsmore had come to claim a Delacorte and any would do. Love had been no consideration.

A noise from inside the dressing room woke her from her reveries. She hastened to get on her nightgown, expecting and hoping Desmond would join her.

She lifted her gaze as the door opened with an almost silent whoosh. Desmond stood naked or as naked as any man she'd ever seen. He had on thin underpants and nothing else. She swallowed and stared boldly instead of looking away.

The wound along his side caught her attention. It didn't appear as bad as it had when she'd seen it covered with blood.

"Don't worry about it." He noticed where she looked and read her mind.

"It doesn't hurt any more?" she asked.

"A soreness I can live with."

Desmond approached. And while her gaze had momentarily drifted down the length of him, she returned to staring at his eyes as he neared the bed. She shivered in anticipation.

“I’ll not hurt you.” He stroked the side of her face.

Afraid she’d embarrass herself with how clumsy she’d be with intimacy, her eyes watered in distress.

Desmond’s mouth twisted to the side with a wicked smile. He pulled her fingers to his warm lips and kissed the length of her arm. Slow and sensuous, he swept upward along her skin.

She shuddered.

“I know you’re tired. I am, too.” His kiss traveled over the ball of her shoulder. “However, around you I feel refreshed.”

His arm circled her waist and he bent over and slipped an arm under her legs.

She held his neck and didn’t speak.

“I want to kiss you all over, from head to toe and I want you to enjoy every minute.”

He had her skin quivering with eagerness and her mind spellbound by the seduction.

Desmond dropped her lightly onto the feather mattress. His knee pressed near her side and she sank into the fluffy pillows. She didn’t let go as he hovered over her. Instead, she pulled to bring his weight down and crush her.

“I love your soft curves.” He kissed her.

His finger swept over the top of her breast and shaped it to his palm. The light cotton fabric of her nightgown did not stop the titillating heat.

“You’ll tell me anything you don’t like and everything you do.”

She nodded.

“Do you like this?” He swirled his fingertips gently over the bump her nipple made.

“Yes.”

“Would you like me to tease it more?”

“Mmm...yes,” she moaned.

“What if I rub harder?” He pressed the button.

She arched to the sparked heat of friction. “Desmond.” She gripped his shoulders.

“You like that I see.”

The ribbon on her nightgown fluttered about in his hand. He released the binds and opened the lace-edged collar. He pressed kisses to her warm skin. She whimpered anxiously for his mouth to fit her aching breast.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?” He flexed one nipple with a mindless persistence.

Ainsley squirmed unable to control herself. His manipulation of her flesh teased her with imposing sensations she could only respond to with more writhing.

“Desmond, please,” she begged.

“Are you pleased?” His tongue strummed the hardened tip of her breast.

He lifted his head and she saw deep into his green eyes. He seriously wanted to know.

“Yes.” She let a long breath out. “Oh, yes.”

“Close your eyes,” he instructed.

She did as he asked and excitement heated her pores. With gentle guidance, he pulled her up and carefully worked the nightgown over her head. The fabric swept across her breasts and a chill of air tightened her skin more than Desmond’s kiss had.

Moving closer, she liked the way her nipples burrowed into the hair on his chest.

“Open your eyes,” he commanded.

She let her lashes flutter up.

“Nervous?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Do you want to close your eyes again?”

“Not unless you want me to.”

His arms tightened. “I want what will make you comfortable.”

She smiled and slid her arms around his waist, folding them up to caress the taut skin of his back. She couldn't think of any other time she felt as nervous and comfortable within the same minute.

He took her mouth in his. Warm, wet kissing, with affection, left her dreamily happy in his embrace. He had the experience to know how to kiss a woman into a complete daze. His full lips pulled at hers. His tongue curled and danced tortuously with hers.

It took well over a half hour for him to stop kissing her and rise off the bed to remove his underpants. Content, Ainsley watched him complete the quick task. He didn't stand still long enough for her to study him as she would have liked.

He pulled her leg to the side and knelt between her knees. When he dropped to his hands, one on each side of her shoulders, she sucked in her breath. His erection brushed the inside of her thigh, tickling her skin. She didn't think velvet could be any smoother upon sensitive skin than his silky maleness.

She slipped her hand over his pelvic bone and explored with a gentle sweep of her fingers over his abdomen. Following the fine hairs beneath his navel, she rubbed her way downward until her touch reached a point where the hair thickened.

She didn't need to ask if he liked her examining the top of his shaft of flesh. His eyelids drooped with a dreamy relaxation. Gliding over the tip of his maleness, she extracted a droplet of moisture. Curiosity led her to put her finger to her lips. She licked and tasted the essence of him.

Desmond sank down and his mouth crashed against hers. His hand went between them and he parted the folds of her sex to fit the head of his cock against her entrance. Pressure made her tense. The sensation lasted all of a second as she struggled to welcome him into her body. Stroking over his tense muscles, she hoped to reassure him she wanted to be his wife in every way.

“Hold on to me,” he commanded.

She wrapped her arms around his neck. In a single thrust, his hips met hers and the weight of him squished her into the mattress. His kisses went fervently over her face at her outcry and he didn’t stop until she quieted. Her body adjusted to the sting of her insides and left a dull soreness in place.

Desmond offered her sounds of condolence. Murmurs like wordless whispers bespoke love to her heart. The crescendo picked up as their bodies rocked together. They fit well and seemed a match made by fate, instead of by accident.

“You feel good like this, Ainsley.”

Her emotions had strangled her vocal cords and made talking too strenuous.

“If you lift your legs around my waist, it will ease the discomfort.”

Fanned out as they were didn’t exactly soothe the stretched muscles of her inner thighs and she drew her knees up.

Desmond pulled one of her trembling limbs into place and she did the other. What they were doing didn’t embarrass her as much as the noise of the bed thumping against the wall. She had to wonder if someone would come to inquire about the racket.

“Do you hear the music, sweet Ainsley?”

She strained an ear and heard nothing beyond the sounds of his body meeting hers with a wonderful madness.

“N-no,” her breath stuttered the word.

Music would not penetrate the thick stucco walls.

“Between us,” he grunted.

His body slammed her into the sagging, down-filled mattress. The sheets tangled around them.

“Oh God,” he ground harshly against her mouth.

The tremors she had suffered rose to new heights. She dug fingers into his flesh. She felt faint as her eyes rolled back into her head. The wiry hair nesting his cock, dragged rough over her clit with his flexing

hips. She contemplated losing her last conscious thought to the ecstasy when he jerked to a halt and a warm and pleasant liquid filled her, soothing her tender center.

His kisses came rushed and fervent. He overwhelmed her with emotions. She opened her eyes and saw his all watery. She couldn't hold back the dams containing her tears. He confused her with his quiet look. Maybe she had imagined everything had been right between them when it really had been horrible.

Chapter Sixteen

Desmond kissed her wet cheeks.

"Don't cry, sweetheart. I know it has embarrassed you, but it will get better."

"That's not it," she sniffled. "I just don't know if I can please you."

"I've never had a woman more pleasing than you. You're everything I've ever wanted or needed in a lover."

"Now you're teasing me and I don't like it."

"You don't," he laughed. "If we're going to be honest, then I don't like when you bottle up your opinions as if you have no right to them. I want to hear your likes and dislikes. I'd love to learn all there is to know about you."

"You would?" She blinked.

"I want you to be a part of my life, not just as my wife, but my partner." He flicked a finger over her nose. "No more crying? You make me feel as if I've hurt you when I see your tears."

With an adoring expression, she cupped his face. Her finger wiped beneath his lower lash. She had driven sentiment into his soul. He had felt things he didn't know how to share. Her quiet gaze answered his question. She saw how their joining affected him.

Desmond rubbed one of the legs she had still fastened to his hip. When she let it down, he eased over to his side, pulling her to him.

"I should go now and let you sleep."

"Go?" she squeaked.

He watched her modesty return as he got up from the bed. She tugged the sheet to her bosom though one breast remained exposed and her reddened nipple peeked out from her folded arm.

"I need sleep, Ainsley. Tomorrow will be another long day." He put on his underpants.

"Don't go."

He looked up from the ties at his waistband. Her gaze locked on his with a desperate yearning.

"You want me to stay?" he asked, to make sure he understood. "Here in your room, with you?"

She nodded. "I won't make a sound while you sleep."

He moved to the side of the bed and took her hand. "You wouldn't have to make a sound. It would be the sweet perfume of your body, the heavy scent of your sex and the flavor of each breath you took that would prevent me from sleeping."

"Oh, I'm sorry for suggesting it, m'lord." She lowered her gaze sheepishly.

He shook his head, not understanding women and how this one, full of passion, could be in control of his actions.

"I'd enjoy the place next to you." He took the sheet from her hand and tweaked her nipple. "I just wonder how well you might tolerate me when I can't resist coming into your body."

"I'll tolerate you very well...Desmond." Her lashes fluttered up with the tip of her chin. "I'd welcome you."

"Ah, the offer is appreciated. Right now, I am far beyond tired. I am a walking corpse, I'm so weary." He sat on the bed. "We shall let your body heal a night before I take you again."

Ainsley didn't know if that meant he didn't want to touch her at all or not and she scooted over as he lay down. Maybe an inch or two separated them, yet nothing broke the heat building from their bodies.

"Goodnight, m'lord." She sighed like a contented cat.

“Good night, Ainsley.”

She lay there a long time, listening to his breathing slow down. When he snored lightly she tempted fate.

“Desmond?” she whispered.

He shifted in his sleep toward her and his fingers crawled over her stomach. Her breath stopped as she tightened every muscle in her belly and waited. For what, she didn’t know. Nothing happened as he continued to sleep. She sidled closer, completely forgetting about his wound until her fingers hit upon it. He grumbled and snatched up her hand.

“I’m sorry.”

“Go to sleep,” he muttered pulling her arm over the wound and across him.

“Desmond?”

“Hmmm?”

“Nothing.” She snuggled and listened to the thump of his heart.

She never dreamed sleeping with a man could be wonderfully peaceful.

“Whenever you want me, I’ll be here.”

She smiled and wondered if he had actually said those words or if she was already asleep imagining them. Either way, they were comforting.

* * *

The remaining hours of the night had passed. Ainsley glanced over at the bright light filtering through a crack in the draperies and she shut her eyes, not wishing to wake and see day.

Desmond had exhausted her throughout the night, but it was time well spent cuddling and kissing and experiencing love in a way she never dreamed possible.

The urgency of bodily functions pulled her out of bed, and when she finished performing her necessities, she returned to the nest she'd made in the rumpled covers.

Fully awake, she frowned at the emptiness. She had no idea when Desmond left or even why since she'd made it clear she liked sleeping with him.

Climbing on the mattress, she put a hand to the dent in the pillow next to hers. Her face followed. She inhaled every heady trace of Desmond from the fabric. The scent of the port he drank and the fragrance of cigar smoke that clung to him from the party were the strongest. She took another deep breath wishing to find that one smell that was just him.

At the knock on her door, her daydreams dissipated. Margaret's glare after entering almost cut off all contemplations about Desmond. The woman's sour look made Ainsley wonder why Margaret appeared to dislike her.

Ainsley tried not to let Margaret's grunts of disapproval disturb her. She closed her eyes and remained lying on the last spot Desmond occupied in the bed.

For ten minutes, she thought only of Desmond. With every caress, each stroke, he had talked to her with love ringing in his voice. She attempted to recall the phrases he used but Margaret's noisy presence always drew her mind from her memories.

Ainsley sat up, wishing the woman would leave. She stared at Margaret taking her time folding the clothing she wore the night before.

"I'll take care of putting those away," Ainsley said when Margaret picked up her undergarments.

Margaret gave her a disapproving glance. Ainsley never believed in leaving everything for servants to do. She often put away her own clothes and straightened her room.

"As you wish." Margaret walked to the door. "Lord Dunsmore wishes you to be ready in fifteen minutes."

"Fifteen minutes!" Ainsley jumped off the bed. "Oh, that woman is a miserable wretch to have not told me when she first came in the room," she grumbled.

She dressed quickly and whirled out of the room within her allotted time. It was hardly ladylike to trot down the stairs, and much to her surprise, Desmond witnessed her ungraceful gallop.

"Ainsley, what's the rush?"

Desmond picked up her hands and the odd expression on his face confused her.

"I only gave Margaret word a little while ago to ask that you consider rising in another fifteen minutes." He twisted a curl of her hair and tucked it back in place.

She would have fastened up her long hair if she'd had more time to prepare. The smile on Desmond's face told her he liked it hanging loosely tied back with a ribbon at her nape.

"I thought...she said..." Ainsley took a deep breath and let her anger dissolve. "Nothing, I've been up for a while."

"Then I guess all that delays us is Lady Edwina. Once she's ready, we'll go. I did tell you we'd be stopping at the duke's London residence before we travel to the prince's country estate, didn't I?"

Ainsley shook her head.

From the expression on Desmond's face, she guessed he purposely hadn't told her. It wasn't hard to understand why, given her atrocious behavior at the party.

"It's nothing to worry about. We'll not be there long and it's only a formality that he meet you...again, that is."

She found his attempt to make light of the event very sweet. She saw his concern quite clearly and squeezed his hand.

"He'll not surprise me this time, I promise." At least she hoped not.

"We, of course, will miss the horse race the prince is having today. Harlan's not too happy as he loves the sport."

"I've never seen a horse race."

“Hmmm, that is something we’ll have to remedy in the future. There will be other activities tonight and tomorrow.”

“Will there be a lot of people at the duke’s?” She fell in step with him as they went to a large, warmly decorated room. Bouquets of roses filled vases, as if someone had brought the garden indoors. She pushed her nose into a very large yellow bloom. The fragrance made magic come alive in her heart. Desmond’s large, satisfied grin brought happy tears to her eyes.

“Thank you,” she said, now knowing the reason Desmond had left her bed early.

“For what?” His humility was touching.

“They’re beautiful.” She took his hands. “And very thoughtful of you.”

He tugged her closer. “It’s not as extravagant as we would have had with a real wedding, but I wanted to show you...” He met her unspoken request and kissed her.

A sigh heaved from her body. “We’re really married and that’s all that matters.”

He sipped at the corner of her mouth and licked over her lips, warming her to a million sensations.

“Desmond, I...”

“I want to make love to you, Ainsley.”

She nodded, choked by the confession of love she had trapped inside her.

He lowered her to the settee. “I don’t care if it’s broad daylight. Once was not enough to get me through the day.”

She continued to nod while coiling her arms around his neck as he lowered her down on the cushions.

“Desmond.” She kissed him firmly. “Desmond, I lov—”

A cough from outside the room cut her off. Desmond pulled her up and she looked around him to see Harlan with his back to the doorway.

"Lady Edwina is in the carriage bouncing up and down like a ten-year-old," he informed them. "Might I suggest you postpone your activities?"

Ainsley scooted off the settee and dodged Desmond's hand.

"Ainsley," Desmond called with notable concern in his voice.

She stopped at the doorway. "I'm just getting my cloak. I'll only be a minute."

His smile sent shockwaves right into her toes. His dark brows lifted, making his brilliant green eyes twinkle brighter than ever.

"Sometimes I do run in the right direction, m'lord," she told him and hurried off.

"Kissing your wife in the drawing room." Harlan playfully scolded once Ainsley was out of hearing range. "What will the servants think?"

"Probably that I'm crazy."

"Or?" Harlan coaxed him to fess up.

"Or, I might very well have fallen in love with my own wife."

"She's a gift, Des. Don't mess it up with this nonsense you've gotten yourself into."

"She was a means to an end. I'll not back down from my plans. They are important to me and England." He watched the doorway and saw Ainsley in the foyer, laughing and smiling as she fastened her cloak.

"But you'll not give her up?"

"Never by my choosing. Unfortunately, I'm afraid when all is said and done, it may be the Lady Dunsmore who wishes to give up on me."

He watched her gaiety and the spirit she hid. He had a greater fondness for her than he ever believed possible.

"What happened with Nellie last night?"

"Damn, I was supposed to meet with her and get that information."

He rubbed his jaw and paced in front of the settee. Marriage agreed with him too much and while he had important business to tend to, he couldn't say he disliked having a wife.

"Ainsley and I...well, we were bloody tired with all this traipsing around from France, to home, to here, and now to one of Prince George's country residences. We needed a measure of sleep."

"I bet," Harlan snickered.

Ainsley floated toward them. She moved alongside Desmond and took his arm.

"Come, my lords. Lady Edwina will wear herself out if she's left too long." She took Harlan's arm as well.

"I hope you had Edwina home early enough to get some sleep," Desmond commented.

"We didn't stay much longer than you. It seems she met a gentleman who mentioned he'd also be where we're heading today and she wanted to rest up to take full advantage of his time."

"Who did she meet?" Desmond stopped on the steps down to the carriage.

"I don't know, she didn't say." Harlan shrugged.

"Didn't or wouldn't?" He resumed leading Ainsley down the steps.

"Desmond, it's only someone she just met." Ainsley rubbed his arm. "He'll no doubt have to get by you to marry her, so relax and let her enjoy the attention."

Desmond liked when Ainsley called him by his given name. It was more personal and endearing. He smiled at her and swept a stray lock from her face. The silky tendril curled over his finger as he held the side of her face and kissed her.

He looked at Harlan and he knew deep inside he should have waited for privacy. The compelling need to show his brother who Ainsley belonged to overwhelmed him.

"Forgive me. I shouldn't have done that in the open."

“You, m’lord, have my permission to do that anytime you please.” She rose up on her toes and kissed him lightly on the lips.

Hugging her tight, feeling very much in love, and as Ainsley pointed out, not caring who knew, he lifted her from her feet and swung her around kissing her again. He’d always welcome her laughter.

“Come on, please!” Edwina whined from inside the coach.

Desmond scooped Ainsley up. He stood her in the conveyance, got in and sat beside her.

Chapter Seventeen

“The Lord and Lady Dunsmore,” the duke’s butler announced.

Desmond held Ainsley’s hand and willed all his courage to his wife. It surprised him she didn’t tremble as she stood ready to face the man who had made her ill with nervousness the night before.

“By Jove, you were right, Desmond. The girl is a beauty when not running. Those big blue eyes could warm a man’s soul.” He waved at her to approach.

“Your Grace.” She curtsied and offered her hand.

“Extremely lovely.” He tipped her chin up. “Not a trace of your mother or father in those features. Maybe they found you on the wayside and toted you home to pass off as a Delacorte.”

“They most certainly did not.”

Her indignation rightfully increased with the insulting, flippant way he made fun of her family. Desmond wanted to step forward to intervene.

“I’m sorry, Your Grace.” Ainsley backed into Desmond.

He put his hands on her shoulders to give support and offered a comforting caress down her arms.

“Your Grace, I don’t think it necessary to make my wife uncomfortable by your ill humor.” He rubbed his thumbs just above Ainsley’s shoulder blades.

“Yes, thank you for the correction. I see the girl looks better than halfway out the door if I should speak another word to her.” He regarded her a minute longer. “Very well, send her out and let us talk.”

Desmond escorted Ainsley to the exit. “Don’t go far,” he told her, then turned back into the room.

His strides were long and his anger less civil than Ainsley's. He held his temper until his grandfather dismissed the servants from the room.

"You will never speak to her like that again," he warned.

"So you've taken a liking to your wife," the duke exclaimed with surprise. "You, of all people...an acclaimed bachelor. This sudden marriage will put many a tart into tears. You know, Desmond, it is not unheard of to just bed your wife and leave behind the niceties. You needn't exhaust yourself with her emotions. All women are frail and coy. It comes with getting what they want. Of course, you will put on a good show as any interested chap might, but you must see she overplays her retiring ways to further her hold on you."

"I'm a fair hand when it comes to knowing people, especially women. None has gotten the better of me yet. As for Ainsley, yes, I do care about her. I live with her and will for many years to come."

"Enough of this girl, she was a means to our end. Tell me of the prince. Last night, did you spend time with him? Learn of his thoughts regarding France?"

"Actually, I didn't. My contact had a message to pass on. Unfortunately, I had to leave before I could retrieve the note." He placed his hands behind his back and paced the room.

"Did she tell you what was in the letter?" The duke poured himself and Desmond a drink.

"How do you know it's a she?" He took the glass and gulped down a large portion of the port.

"Come now, Desmond. Do you think I haven't got others gathering information for me?" He grinned.

"And that includes spying on me?" Desmond took another angry swallow.

"No, no, not spying on you, watching out for your interests. They spy on who you talk to and I must say Lady Shelby is a tasty morsel. You'd do wise not to discard your mistress so quickly. I daresay your naive child bride has probably shown you her best and comes up short with her skill."

“My wife and my private affairs are no business of yours, Your Grace. Ainsley is young, but she is no child. This is not a brothel and she is not a common whore. You’ll be wise to never mention her again.”

“You can spout off as you like, Lord Dunsmore, but don’t let the girl interfere with our plans. She is making you soft in the head and that can be very dangerous when dealing with the politics of seeing Napoleon’s rise back to power.” He sat behind his desk. “Now enough about whom you bed. Let us discuss the next phase.”

* * *

Ainsley waited as Desmond requested. It certainly was better than returning to the parlor where not only Harlan and Edwina stayed, but other relatives as well. She specifically wanted to avoid the Lady Victoria.

The servants had come out of the den shortly after her, looking as she felt, humiliated. They scurried away and she strolled closer to the door. She studied the ornately carved wood embellished with the Rawlington coat of arms. The deep recesses seemed adequate for listening.

She checked the corridor to see that she was alone. Then she put her ear upon the wood. She heard the duke mention France and pressed her face tighter.

“No, we did not speak on such matters,” Desmond said.

She strained to hear every word.

“It was a gala affair, happy people and such. What would you have me do, walk up to the Prince Regent and say, looky here old chap, tell me, what are your plans if Bonaparte returns to power? St. Helena is not big enough for his ego, and thus, since he returned from exile once, why not twice?”

Treason! Ainsley felt faint.

“And he will, Desmond,” the duke replied. “We have friends and alliances with those wishing to put Napoleon back in the seat of supremacy. Waterloo was nothing more than dramatics for Arthur

Wellesley. He looked for his own victory. Nothing that could help British rule. He rose up in the ranks of the army, was knighted, and to reward his gallantry, he was created first Duke of Wellington. It is barbaric that anyone can be so honored.”

Ainsley looked about, her concerns of being caught eavesdropping were nothing compared to now. She would have to warn the Crown, tell of Desmond’s conversation with the duke. It would mean Desmond’s life. She gripped the molding at the doorframe and pushed herself away as the tap of footsteps alerted her that someone approached.

“Ainsley, have you met with the duke?” Lord Harlan took her hands. “You’re shaking. Then you have met him. He’s nothing to be frightened of.” He steered her to a bench.

“He was a bit abrasive, I must admit, and I spoke out of turn so I was banished while he takes an audience with your brother.”

“Bravo for you on both accounts. Speaking back to the old fellow never did anyone harm and having you dashed from his presence can only be a good thing if one dislikes his company.”

“And you, do you find his company tolerable?”

“Oh, we get on okay, I suppose. Desmond is his favorite. He’s like his lapdog. Always paying favor to the old crotch and doing his bidding with little more than a thought as to what trouble it might get him in.”

“You don’t have to sit here with me. Lord Dunsmore asked I wait for him and I find the quiet corridor calming.” She smiled. “Go on back to the others and we’ll be along shortly.”

Lord Harlan’s reluctance made her shoo him away like a fly on butter. Her fingers swept the air to flick him farther from her. Once he had gone and no one else sprang themselves on her, she flew back to the door.

“I’ll tell you it was a stroke of genius you had in marrying the insipid child. Though I assumed from the duchess’s letter she was older.”

A chair scraped the floor and Ainsley suspected someone either sat or stood.

"She's the sister," Desmond answered. "The other wasn't intimidated by her mother. She fell in love with a Frenchman and married him. I took what was left."

"Left," Ainsley muttered.

She remained at the door, no longer caring who might see her.

"Well, the less questioning the better. I daresay the girl is afraid of her own shadow, making it improbable for her to find out that we aim to change history."

"Ainsley is no threat. Not as long as I keep her entertained."

"That shouldn't be hard. I saw the way she looked at you, smitten by your good looks and charm. Last night the Lady Shelby appeared to have a similar infatuation with you. If I'd known beforehand, I might have suggested a marriage to her."

"Yes, a more suitable match, I agree. However, she would not get me as close to the Prince Regent as Ainsley, whose sweetness has captivated him. I'll use that to my advantage. Now, if you'll excuse me. I've left my wife waiting far too long."

Ainsley backed away from the door after she heard the chair scrape the floor again. In moments, her husband would open the door. If she didn't move quickly, he would catch her spying. She picked up the hem of her dress and ran down the hall. Checking the rooms she passed by and those she traveled through, she reached the perfect escape. She flung open one tall, wide door and didn't think to close it as she hurried down the steps from the portico into an enclosed garden.

Chapter Eighteen

“There you are, my dear. I’ve looked all over and even spoke, apparently to myself, in several rooms, thinking you might be hiding in any one of them.” Desmond took Ainsley’s hand and brushed a kiss over the cool knuckles. “I’ve talked to Harlan and we’re ready to leave.”

“Then let us go.”

She pulled her hand away and brushed past him to get in the manor. Her fingers folded around the knob before he could open it.

Desmond didn’t know what had gone wrong, but somewhere between kissing her that morning and now, she had grown cold. His hand on her arm only made her distance herself. Each time he waited to catch her eye as she gave her goodbyes, she gazed at him with indifference.

The carriage departed as planned. But the seating arrangement changed when Ainsley climbed in and sat next to Harlan. Desmond no longer appreciated that his brother had the affections of his wife. Edwina went into her routine of idle chatter.

Two days married and Desmond didn’t know his wife. Maybe his grandfather was right. She used her timorous nature to gain sympathy, weeping and moaning with imagined worries to get her way. Looking at her, he shook his head. One glimpse of her adoring smile, her flushed, pink cheeks and the little gasp she gave when he kissed her would trap even the cruelest man into doing her bidding.

“Here, I have a string with me.” Edwina took her piece of twine out and handed it to Harlan.

Promptly he tied it into a loop and wrapped it around her fingers. “Would you like to play cat’s cradle, Ainsley?”

"I'd love to." She leaned over Harlan's outstretched hands when he offered her to take the first turn and manipulated the loop of twine into a twisted puzzle.

Edwina went next. Her giggling annoyed Desmond.

"I'm not interested." He pushed her hands away when she tried to get him to play.

Harlan went again.

A difficult configuration of the string was put to Ainsley. "Oh, this one I always get tangled." She let her fingers dangle in the loops.

"That's right," Harlan coaxed.

"This spot here." Her finger brushed over his as it slid into the gap. "Oh, I think I've gotten it." She took her hands away. "Hmmm, that's not right."

Ainsley clamped her hands around the bundle of string and Harlan's wrapped hers. "No bother. You start and then..."

Desmond pulled Harlan's hands away from Ainsley's. He snatched the string and with a slight flick of his wrist, flipped it out the window. "A child's game. I'll have no more."

"That was rude," Ainsley charged. "You had no right to do that, even if it is a child's game." She slapped the side of the coach. "Stop at once," she demanded.

The coach slowed and came to a halt. She opened the door.

"What are you doing?" Desmond grabbed her wrist.

"I'm going to get back something you had no right to throw away."

She stepped over his legs and climbed out even with his fingers restraining her.

"I have every right where you are concerned, my dear wife. Get back in this carriage at once. Harlan can get the string, if he wants it." Desmond leaned down and lifted her up.

"Desmond, let her go. You're being a total brute. You've watched Edwina and I play the game hundreds of times. You've even joined us. What is wrong with you?" Harlan stood hunched. "Put her down."

"Please, Desmond, don't do anything rash," Edwina cried. "I hate when you and Harlan quarrel."

"Put her down and we'll forget the whole thing," Harlan said again.

Desmond let Ainsley go. The blood rushed jealously through his veins and he didn't know why. Harlan would never betray him, even for a pretty face. He hopped out and followed Ainsley, looking along the roadside.

"Get in the coach, Ainsley."

"You can pretend all you want that you own me and maybe you do, right down to my satin slippers. However, don't ever think you can control what I think about or what I believe in."

Desmond's gaze narrowed on her. Something had been said or told to her, creating a rift between them. They weren't arguing over a silly string.

"What is it you think I want you to believe?" He took hold of her elbow. "Why do you think I'd need control?"

"What is it that you got from the duchess for my troth? We had nothing."

He took her other arm and pulled her against him. "I got nothing but you." He kissed the bouquet of curls under his nose. "Ainsley, tell me what's wrong?"

"I have nothing more to say."

He kissed her temple, then let go to get the string. "Here, go back and play your game. I'll not bother you."

He ached all over with tension and wished he could share his burden with her. His grandfather's madness had him under stress. He ran a hand over his hair and held firm to the headache at the base of his head. Soon he'd have to make a move...very soon, before he couldn't stop the outcome.

At the coach, Ainsley took the hand Harlan offered to help her up. Her gaze briefly met Desmond's and he had a bad feeling she knew the evil in the depths of his soul.

Desmond couldn't continue on the trip with her. He'd ride up top with the driver and free her from his miserable mood. Ainsley Rawlington was a lady. Refined, empathetic and spirited in every way, and yet she had looked at him like he stole those traits from her.

Just to see her smile, he'd do anything.

Desmond pushed the door shut. "I'll ride up top."

"M'lord?" Ainsley hung her head out the opening and looked at him while he climbed the side. He glanced at her beautiful face. She always appeared troubled and he knew no one could be to blame other than himself. He put her in predicaments she had no control over. He forced her in front of people when she'd rather sit in a room quietly by herself.

"I need the air," he falsely explained.

He smiled because she made him happy, yet she didn't give one in return and that made him sad.

After they rode through the country for more than an hour, he tapped the coachman on the arm to stop. The grandeur of the prince's summer home stretched out before him and he got down to meet Harlan stepping out.

"I thought we might rest a few minutes." Desmond glanced at the coach, waiting to see Ainsley.

"She's asleep and it isn't any wonder after her past few days. You've hardly given the lady a chance to adjust and yet you've placed her in front of every devil we know."

Harlan reached a hand in the coach. "Come on, Edwina, we'll take a walk and give our dear brother a moment with his wife."

Desmond gave him a nod of gratitude and climbed in. He sat and pulled Ainsley into the crook of his arm. He lifted her hand and examined her fingers. They fit perfectly in his palm. He brought them up to kiss and glanced at her when they moved. Her eyes were open and trained on him. Her reticent features remained placid. The tranquil gaze moved over his face questioningly.

"I had the coach stop for you to get out and stretch your legs."

"A kindness you didn't have to bother with on my account," she whispered, as if it were a secret she didn't wish to reveal.

The heat surrounding her flushed face drew his mouth. He witnessed boldness overpower her. She pressed her fevered lips to his in a hurried gesture surrounded with fears he never wanted her to have.

"I'd never deny you this," he moaned, desperately pleased by her initiative.

He lifted a hand to the side of her head. Her fingers rose to touch his jaw. Kisses, light, tender and affectionate, traveled from her parched lips to sip at the corner of a smile he couldn't contain.

Harlan interrupted them by a cough from outside.

"I should get out and work the kinks from my stiff limbs." She pulled away and glanced out the window.

"One more minute?" He stroked her sleeve.

"I wouldn't want to hold everyone up."

"They can walk for all I care at the moment." He dragged her back into his lap, into his embrace, and held the delicate face before him.

Desmond kissed her hard and hungry. He parted her lips with the thrust of his tongue and took swipes at the cavern of her mouth. She hummed fervently. With his hands journeying over the curve of her throat, he brushed her collarbone. He cupped one breast and felt the hardness of a spiked nipple. With every labored breath, her chest heaved.

She was a hummingbird with her fiery quick pecks to his face, a butterfly with her graceful touches to his neck and he jerked the cravat free to give her access.

"Desmond." She pressed her face under his chin.

"We do seem to have the same thoughts at the most inopportune time." He took his hand from her breast and held the back of her head. "I don't know what I did to upset you, Ainsley, and if you don't want to tell me, that's fine. I just don't want you to drift so far from me that I can't fix things between us. I must ask you to always blindly forgive me, because I'm stupid with my actions around you."

She nodded and her eyes watered.

He brushed the tears from her cheeks. "You mean a great deal to me and I never want to make you unhappy." He pulled her face up to kiss her.

It seemed to be more a priority than ever not to make her sad. Her tears told him he had done something.

"Desmond, can we go now, please?" Edwina whined from outside.

"I suppose we can't ignore her forever." Desmond helped Ainsley off his lap and back onto the seat. "She's a handful and a half. The man that gets her is going to find himself in a pickle if he thinks he'll wear the breeches in the family."

Desmond kicked open the door.

Ainsley remained close, holding his one hand while he offered his other one to his sister.

"Get in here." He tugged her up forcefully. "You know a lady should be patient."

"I know and I can be if someone would show better manners. I beg your pardon, Lady Dunsmore." She smiled, then turned her glare on Desmond.

* * *

Ainsley tried not to hold Desmond's arm too tightly. She didn't feel as nervous as she had the day before, at least not until she saw the Prince Regent approaching.

"Ah, cousin, please come up here where you may see this wonderfully new thing that I have to entertain us," he exclaimed. "It's called a diorama."

Desmond gave her up too easily.

"I have someone I need to speak with. I'll join you shortly."

She looked over her shoulder while moving. Desmond had seemed preoccupied from the moment they arrived. His hurrying away made her

uncomfortable. The prince tugging on her arm made her even more apprehensive.

He pulled her to the opening of a cylindrical contraption and she peered through the hole.

“Isn’t it magnificent, the way it all looks real?” He chuckled. “The little people and horses appear to linger as the light alters them.”

“It is very lovely.” She liked the way the scenes changed to transform the seasons.

“Now, tell me, is your marriage agreeable?” He asked the personal question as if it was of consequence to him.

Ainsley glanced about for Desmond. She’d accept Harlan in his place, since he said she could hide behind him if necessary.

“There has been trouble with the Rawlingtons. Not your husband, but some other members of his family. A little bird has left me a message that Lord Dunsmore married you to get his invitation here.”

“And who hasn’t done something to gain the favor of your company, Your Highness. After all, you are Prince Regent and destined to be king. My husband may simply wish to be included on your invitation list.”

“So your marriage is agreeable?”

“Yes, why of course it is. Should it not be?”

She followed the prince’s stare across the room to Desmond and Lady Shelby. Immediately, Ainsley wanted to shrink into a small ball of dust and blow away. She would have vanished from site of the humiliating scene of her husband with another woman, if the prince didn’t have hold of her arm.

Desmond didn’t merely stand and talk, but kept the lady close and guided her along to a set of glass doors. They were laughing and she showed him a very intimate fondness by stroking his jaw. He opened the door and she kissed his cheek before she swept outside ahead of him.

Ainsley didn’t want to believe what her eyes saw. Her stomach lurched with a sickness. Desmond glanced her way and his gaze was void of emotion. Hers could not be, as her eyes welled with water. He ignored

her teary stare, turned away and proceeded out the open door behind the Lady Shelby.

“Excuse me.” Ainsley bowed a polite nod to the prince.

He didn’t try to stop her as she crossed the room. The door stood wide open to let in the summer breeze and she stood near to listen to the conversation outside.

“You’ve married a child, Desmond.” The lady’s voice was playful. “Does she give you little kisses on the cheek and giggle when you look at her?”

“We’re not out here to speak about my wife.”

“Kiss me, Desmond,” Lady Shelby purred seductively. “I’ve missed you while I was away.”

“Someone might see. If my wife were anyone other than a cousin to the prince, then you know I would have no qualms of doing more than kissing you.”

Ainsley slapped a hand to her chest as she gasped mutely.

“One kiss, Desmond, who will know?”

Ainsley stepped into the arched opening and watched Desmond lift the lady’s chin to comply. His mouth fit tight and moved with a rapacious greed. Ainsley felt the burning betrayal rip through her veins and sever her affections. He had no right to kiss another woman and she hated how horribly stupid it made her feel for trusting him.

Chapter Nineteen

Desmond sensed someone watched and there in the opening he glimpsed Ainsley. He pulled from Nellie.

“Desmond?” Nellie’s perplexed expression reminded him not to lose all of his composure.

“Tell me what news you have.” He led her down the stone steps and into the garden away from eavesdroppers. Not that he had any worries of Ainsley spying. He’d just witnessed a good cause for her to scamper off and hide.

While he listened to Nellie, he tried to think of ways to explain away the kiss to his wife.

“We’ve got wonderful news of Bonaparte’s arrival. I told you before that he would return if he had the backing of nobles. In two days, there will be a ship from St. Helena and he’ll be on it if he is given the message all is clear.”

“He’s going to come here, to England? Should he not go to France?”

“Oh, Desmond, we cannot help him long-distance.” She laughed. “He’ll be sheltered here and when the time is right, he’ll be put back into power.”

Nothing was that simple. Nellie only had one piece of the larger puzzle. While the arrival date was a crucial bit of news, how could he put it into the right hands without tipping his hand to his grandfather?

“This is all happening relatively soon, isn’t it?”

“That is the surprise advantage, Desmond. Who would expect anything this shortly after Bonaparte abdicated on behalf of himself, as well as his son?”

“Yes, who would expect anything?” He steered Nellie back to the party and went in search of Ainsley.

Harlan stood guard over Edwina’s circle of buzzing bees. When he caught his brother’s eye, he mouthed to Harlan if he’d seen Ainsley. Harlan shook his head.

The place was too big to search room by room for her, especially since she had a lot of experience at squeezing herself into tight niches. He took a glass from a serving tray and downed the liquid in one gulp.

He wasted an hour drinking alone in a study before it dawned on him where Ainsley would hide. She’d not want to be seen for the rest of the evening and the best place to avoid such would be in their suite.

He stumbled into a table on his way there. His glass fell and shattered on the floor.

“Why, Desmond, I do believe you’ve been drinking too much.” Nellie motioned for a nearby servant to clean up the mess.

“I’m on my feet, so it’s not as much as it could have been.” He shook loose of Nellie’s hold and continued on his way in search of Ainsley.

He didn’t mean to swing the door open hard. Yet, when it crashed into the wall and bounced back closed, it didn’t surprise him that his timid wife jumped.

She came up out of the chair and the book she held fell to the floor.

“What are you doing up here?” He took her wrist. “I wish you to be at the party.”

“I’m tired and you don’t need me there. I’m sure you could get Lady Shelby to hang on your arm.” She swung her other hand around to hit him.

His reflexes were better than he thought and he caught her small fist.

“I don’t care a thing about Nellie.” He twisted Ainsley’s arms behind her back.

“Odd, the way you kissed her. I would have never guessed you didn’t like her.” She gasped when he repositioned her wrists into one hand and brought the other up to hold her chin.

“Kissing someone doesn’t always mean you like them.” His mouth caught hers as she shook her head trying to avoid it.

His fingers locked onto her jaw and forced her to accept his mouth. He penetrated with his tongue and licked over her slick teeth. Releasing her wrists, he scooped her up.

“Let me go.” She beat on his shoulders as he leaned over the bed.

“You’re my wife.”

The feather mattress all but swallowed her under his weight. He captured her wrists and held them above her head and kissed her again. Her struggle weakened as did his forceful domination.

“Ainsley.” He cupped her face and stroked his thumb over her warm cheek, as if he saw her for the very first time. How could he apologize for wanting her?

She remained motionless. He trailed fingers down her neck and rimmed the edge of her gown. Steadily watching her gaze for signs of denial, he eased the puffed sleeve off her shoulder.

Ainsley put her hand on Desmond’s shoulder. He tensed and immediately relaxed, lowering down to her.

“Oh God, Ainsley, do not turn me away when I need you.”

His hand pushed under her hair on the pillow and elevated her head.

She lifted and pressed her mouth to his. His voice, hoarse and strained with emotion, renewed her devotion.

The kiss deepened. Stunned by the passion, she hugged him. He taunted her with small kisses. She tasted the liquor that made him aggressive. If she could, she’d ask that he never drink again. And yet, the port broke barriers between them. His inhibitions lowered enough to let him confess his need of her.

Desmond caught her bottom lip between his teeth and nibbled at it. He sipped what moisture he created in the corner of her mouth and he trailed kisses over her cheek, to her ear.

“All night, Ainsley. I want to have you to myself all night.”

“Yes,” she agreed, readily pleased by the ardor of his kisses. “Yes, all night.”

His body rocked against her and she felt the ache building inside with a greater intensity. He pushed his tongue between her lips and she sucked on the sweet thickness probing the depths of her throat.

Once more, she lost the seal of his mouth over hers. It didn’t matter because his travels took him to her neck and to her shoulders and she knew his ultimate goal.

“Desmond.” She squirmed, pushing at him to hurry.

He dragged his lips across her collarbone.

Shivering with excitement, she inhaled at the first touch of his lips on the tip of her breast. He continued to work her nightgown downward. She wished he had it already off her and her wish was granted.

He rose and tugged the cloth from her hips, under her bottom and down her legs, until no clothes separated her flesh from his warm hands. She watched his fingers knead and squeeze. He made the ache worse. His massaging caress rotated over her nipples and her body reacted with a shudder.

“You have such wonderful breasts.” He pushed at one tip with his wet tongue. “I enjoy the flavor of your skin.”

“Desmond.”

He suckled her harder and more fervently, traveling and finding new places to burn her with his kiss.

He got up from the bed, and while he removed his jacket and shirt, she watched. She should have felt embarrassment as he stared at her, but she didn’t. It excited her and when his torso was free of clothes, he came back to her.

Desmond’s body had the magnificence of a prized stallion. His nakedness impressed her. It also made her blush. He sat on the bed and she felt better when he leaned toward her so she couldn’t see his large erection.

Without much thought, she reached for him. She wanted to be in his arms. She needed him to keep kissing her to chase away the visions of him kissing another woman.

"I want you and only you," he whispered, filling her worried soul with hope that he meant the words.

"Are you sure?"

"Most certainly, m'lady."

She should have questioned him about Lady Shelby. Maybe while his mind was a little sloshed with port, he'd give her more honesty than he had in the past.

He drew one more kiss from her lips and moved down to her breasts. She weaved her fingers into his dark locks and held him. He licked and nipped, and tugged on one chaffed bead while the other received his teasing fingers, pulling and pinching, causing her to writhe eagerly for more.

His hands moved over her, tickling her belly and every inch of skin. When he neared the crux of all her intimate desires, she stiffened. He immediately sat up and brought her with him.

Ainsley's nipples quivered in the bristles of fine hair on Desmond's chest. He slid his hand under her bottom and lifted her closer to his heart. She held tight, loving the bareness of him against her.

Desmond pulled her mouth to his. She hungered for his kiss and he made the agitation grow as he rubbed aggressively at the outside curve of her one breast.

His hand ventured to her thigh and into the vee of her legs. He swiped a finger through the wetness spilling from her. She tried to hold back the climactic twitching.

"Wet and ready." He laid her on the bed.

"Desmond," she whimpered.

"It won't hurt again."

She nodded and he touched her knee. This time instead of lying in wait for his movements to position her, she parted her legs. She fanned

them open and watched him climb on the bed. His long cock swung stiffly over her leg. The pause he took made her breath catch in her throat.

He smiled and took his cock in his hand. She rose on her elbows and watched him rub the plump tip against her. He pushed, but instead of coming to her, he grasped her hips and pulled her up his lap.

The pressure of him stretched her insides with a discomfort she refused to mention. He dragged her a little more and then held his hand out for her to take.

“I want you to sit up on me.” He tugged.

Her legs slid along his. His hard, erect flesh drove deeper.

“Does it hurt?” He put a hand to her face.

“Only if I move.”

“That’ll get better.”

The desire in his gaze was amazing. He rocked on his bent legs, forcing her up and down. Groans from his efforts met her grunts with a rhythmic timing. He moved faster and she hung onto him, letting the fullness settle into her.

The sensations peaked with a rapid weakening of all her muscles, except those inside. She collapsed against him, drained by the ecstasy. Desmond forced her to endure a blissfully passionate kiss as he squeezed her trembling body tightly and shuddered.

The heated gush of his spending overflowed. He didn’t seem to care. His arms continued to hug her while his hands rubbed away all her tension.

“Hold on,” he instructed and leaned over to deposit her on the bed.

His cock dropped from its place nestled inside her. A laugh burbled from her lips and Desmond smiled at her. He used her nightgown to wipe between her legs and clean himself off.

“Go ahead and get another nightdress.” He helped her off the bed.

She couldn’t help folding her arms to cover her abraded breasts. They tingled from his touch and now his close observation. Her skin shaded

pink with the new embarrassment. His skin had a radiant sheen of perspiration.

Something about being partially nude against him was different than standing away from him. Getting behind the dressing screen, she worked at putting on another nightdress.

Desmond stuck his head around the panel. "I wish to see what you look like without clothes."

"I believe you've seen me quite sufficiently in the bed."

Her gaze drifted to the wound under his ribs.

"It's not much more than a scratch." He touched the stitches.

When he resumed looking at her, Ainsley turned her face, wishing to disappear.

He took her against him. "I don't mean to embarrass you, sweetheart. You're a beautiful woman."

"This is all so new to me."

"I know, and I'm quite pleased by that."

"Why?"

"Because I find pleasure in knowing I'll be the one to teach you all there is to enjoying your body."

"You mean, you enjoying my body."

"That, too."

"It seems somewhat unfair that I can't—"

"Can't what?" He held her away. "You think there is nothing you can do that I would like?"

"Is there?"

"Hmmm...I think we should go slowly."

"You're saying that because you can't think of anything." She pouted, since pleasing him meant a great deal to her.

He took her hand and folded her fingers around his cock. With his guidance, she stroked his shaft and felt it grow large in her palm. The

smoothness of the skin kept her intrigued and eager to try things she'd heard servants speak of when they didn't know she was around.

"That's what your touch does. If you were to do this for a little while longer, I would spend in your hand."

"Is this all I can do for you?" She kissed his chest and nuzzled her cheek to the soft mat of black hair.

He chuckled and took her hand away.

"Finish getting your nightdress on so we can sleep." He kissed her forehead.

"What about the party?" she asked after he left her alone behind the short, white-laced framework.

"That shall go on all night. You're tired, as am I. We'll not be missed."

Desmond staying with her lightened the worry she had he'd leave and seek out Lady Shelby.

She came from behind the screen and Desmond was on the bed. He had his hands locked together, cradling his head as he reclined on the feather mattress. His cock lay nestled in the hair in a flaccid state of repose. Muscles moved beneath his taut skin as he shifted.

She stared at the beautiful sight of him.

"Do you have a problem with me sleeping in your bed?"

"No." She pretended his nudity didn't affect her.

Proceeding to the bed, she slipped under the covers and picked up the comb from the nightstand.

"Here, let me." He sat up and moved close behind her.

His heated breath fanned her cheek as he leaned near and drew the comb through her hair. The scent of him surrounded her and she inhaled to catch every trace.

"You kissed her." The words rushed out of her mouth even though she considered it best not to broach the subject.

"You could plunge a knife in my chest and it would not cause half of the hurt I feel for that mistake."

"You knew I was there and still you took her to the garden." She felt the burning sensation in her lungs threaten her bad judgment in ruining the remainder of the evening.

"Yes, and it meant nothing to me."

"Then why did you do it?"

"Because she asked me to. Maybe she just wanted a reminder of what she can no longer have." He raked her hair back and gathered it in one hand.

"What's that?"

"Me." He kissed the back of her head with a contented sound.

"It doesn't explain why you stayed out there with her."

"How is it you know I did? Seeing the pain in your eyes stunned me and I confess I'm not used to watching that my actions do not hurt someone. I did come looking to explain."

"It took you better than an hour to find me."

"I lost myself to drinking when you wouldn't emerge from behind draperies in the study."

"You really looked for me?"

He pulled her face to the side and kissed her cheek. "Yes."

She sighed with delight and his mouth slid to her lips.

"I'll always come looking for you, Ainsley. Always."

She closed her eyes and relaxed with his continued care. Each glide of the comb over her head, made her sink farther back into his hold. When Desmond finished, he pulled her down on the bed with him. She fit into the bend of his arm. It brought her immense happiness to be there in his embrace.

She loved him and she'd never escape the way she needed him to love her.

Chapter Twenty

Throughout the night, they slept lovingly together, never losing contact for more than a few seconds as they readjusted their positions. Desmond knew, because the slightest move by Ainsley woke him.

Once morning came and the sunlight washed over the bed, Desmond wished he had shut the draperies. He didn't move in fear he'd wake Ainsley. The enjoyment of having her lie asleep, close to him, heightened the stiffness of his morning erection. Her legs were tangled with his and she had a brazenly firm hold on his pulsating cock.

Carefully, he pried her fingers free and pulled her hand up to his abdomen.

"Ainsley, dearest?"

"Hmmm?" she moaned sleepily.

"I have a few things to do this morning, but I'll see you at breakfast, all right?"

"Mmmm." She squirmed against him.

"Ainsley, are you listening to me?"

She stretched her neck and her puckered lips tried to meet his in a blind effort.

"Make love to me," she purred, rubbing her hand over his chest.

He lifted a brow.

"I need you to touch me."

"Ainsley?" He shifted to his side and looked at her sleepy face with a smile in his heart.

She had yet to fully wake and her mind clung to a dream.

He didn't have to move her nightdress far to finger her damp center. During the night the garment had risen to her thighs.

"Like this?" he asked.

"Mmmm...yes," she hummed.

He watched her writhe.

Desmond continued to tickle the hood of her clit, and periodically slid his finger into her cunt.

"Desmond, please," she cried out.

He thumbed the outside rim of her beautiful sex. The creamy moisture dripped to his hand. The intuitive thrusts of her hips sucked his finger in farther. Her breathy gasps sang out her rapture and he caught her mouth for a brief kiss.

"That's it, Lady Dunsmore."

Ainsley opened her eyes and stared. She reached out and her fingers wrapped around his rock-hard erection.

"I want you in me," she insisted.

"Nothing I want more, but..." He pulled her hand away from his cock and scooted off the bed. "I'll be right back."

She made an exasperated cry of disappointment and flopped over on her belly. He looked to use the facilities to relieve himself and when he went back to bed, he found Ainsley asleep.

He watched her for a minute before deciding whether to wake her or not. It appeared there was nothing he wouldn't do for her and discovered it a frightfully scary thing to think. She need only ask and he'd grant her every wish. It wasn't a practice of his to do a woman's bidding without some kind of payment. With Ainsley, he required her love.

Leaving her to her rest, Desmond went downstairs to find Harlan.

In the drawing room, he recognized a little of himself in his brother's flirtation with the females. Harlan had a slew of them absorbed in a story he told.

"Excuse me," Harlan told the lot of them when he saw Desmond.

"How many have you given false hope to this trip?" Desmond folded his arms over his chest.

"Five, I think. Each of them an angel from heaven. I might marry one if I didn't want them all. And you, I feel your days of cavorting have come to an end."

"Naturally, since I'm married." Desmond smiled, uplifted by that fact.

"That's not what will cause you to sever your ties to some, is it?"

"What are you talking about?" Desmond nodded at the ladies giggling. They looked his brother up and down and went back to their conversation. He wondered if they acted anything like men and haggled over who would be the one to approach Harlan first with an indiscreet proposition.

"You said Lady Dunsmore didn't mean anything to you." Harlan gripped Desmond's sleeve and towed him farther out of hearing range of the ladies. "You've truly fallen in love with her, haven't you?"

"Don't be absurd." He grinned, tucking his thumbs in his waistband and rocking on his heels. "I like her, she's my wife and with the kindness I bestow on her, I reap rewards."

"I see you together in quiet corners. You love her and you should tell her."

"The quiet corners are usually where I find Ainsley hiding." At first, he hadn't thought it respectable, but he actually found her quirky fault rather cute.

He no longer had to be the flirt, the rogue, the womanizer. Having a wife—a beautiful, young wife—took him off the market. As for loving Ainsley, he was sure he must, but he'd not tell Harlan those thoughts before he even spoke them to her. And until he knew whether she reciprocated the sentiment, he would keep his feelings to himself.

* * *

Regardless of the mixed emotions she had about Desmond's character, Ainsley woke up happy. But she faced serious problems. If Desmond had involved himself in treason, then he lacked morals. If he had no morals, what would make him be a faithful husband to her? If he wasn't a faithful husband, how could her heart want him so much?

She shifted over into the dent he had left in the bed. While it no longer had the heat of his body, the scent of him was there. She pondered what she'd do next. If she told the prince what she had heard, Desmond would hang. She could confront Desmond...but she didn't really know in what sort of danger that would put her.

Ainsley sat and dangled her legs over the side of the bed. For the time being, she would wait and listen, hoping something new would come up in conversation that could help her.

She stood and everything appeared different after a good night's sleep. She glanced back at the bed with an idea that everything she heard might have been a mistake. Walking to the vanity, she sat in front of the mirror and set about hurrying through her ablutions—washing, combing her hair and all necessities to make her presentable for leaving the room.

On the chair nearby, she saw Desmond's jacket. Walking to it, she picked it up and crushed the fabric to her face, inhaling traces of him as if he were still in the clothing. At the sound of crinkling paper, she dipped a hand into the pocket and retrieved a note. The information left her speechless.

Desmond was in worse trouble than she had imagined. He had details on the return of Bonaparte to England. The conspiracy she overheard involved him, and the document was an integral part of the plot.

Tucking the paper into the sleeve of her nightdress, she was determined not to let him get caught. Somewhere outside, she'd dispose of the evidence. No one would ever see or know of it.

The door opened and Ainsley jumped.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you." Desmond came in with a smile. "Good morning, my sweet. You look radiant." He took her into his arms and pulled her close. "No man has a wife as beautiful I do."

"I'm not even dressed." She laughed nervously.

The note beneath her sleeve made a sound when she hugged him.

"You're overdressed." He pressed kisses to her head.

She felt ill. He had no idea how he was tearing her heart in two, half for him and half for her country. How could he betray her and England?

"What time will we be leaving today?" She gracefully slipped from his arms and checked her face in the mirror.

"Whatever time you wish." He picked up his jacket and put it on. "You've not eaten yet, so I would suggest we wait until you have had some food."

"That will be fine. I wasn't in a hurry, just planning my time."

"Oh, and what have you in mind?" He came behind her and rubbed his hands over her shoulders.

"Taking a walk."

"Splendid, I'll go with you."

"No. I'd like to go alone."

"Alone?"

"I want time to sort through my thoughts and I can't do that with others around me, especially you." She turned to face him. "You stare too intensely at me."

"I'm sorry. Maybe if we were to spend more time together, we could remedy that."

"It is something to consider. For now, I'd really like to take a walk by myself."

"All right, as you wish." He kissed her. "Have your walk and then we'll return home."

"To London?"

"No, to our real home."

Ainsley found the news perfect. If they were in the country, Desmond would have no opportunity to be involved with what was going on. There she would keep him happy and occupied.

“That sounds nice.” She rose on her toes to kiss him.

His mouth met hers and she shivered at the touch of his fingers gliding down her back to her bottom. Her body responded to his with a tremor of excitement.

“I’ll leave you to finish dressing.”

Ainsley nodded and watched him go. Afterward, she finished dressing, and with a white silk parasol in hand, she headed out to find a place to rid herself of the note. She had considered burning it, but had an awful thought that just as she started, someone would arrive and notice.

As she went through the house, few people were up and about. The party, having lasted late into the night, kept many in bed. She ignored everyone she passed and made her way outside as quickly as possible. The river seemed the best place to throw away the incriminating information. Holding the parasol up against the sun to shade her face, she walked hastily along the path taking her to the water’s edge.

The spacious lawns and gardens had attracted other early strollers and she gave a nod as she went by them. Then, finding herself alone, she took out the piece of crisp paper and crumpled it into a tight ball.

She watched the currents as a few leaves drifted by. If the note didn’t sink, someone could retrieve it and she reconsidered the idea of burning the evidence. She’d put it in her jewelry box and wait until they went home. There, in the privacy of her room she’d rip the paper into tiny pieces and then burn them.

“Lady Dunsmore!” Edwina called.

Ainsley stiffened and quickly stuffed the crumpled piece of paper up her sleeve.

Edwina always had the warmest smile and her excited wave was just as exuberant.

“Lady Dunsmore, hasn’t this been truly an amazing trip?” Edwina twirled around.

“Yes, very. We shall go home soon though.”

“Oh no, we can’t leave. Not yet. Last night, hardly half the people who were to arrive had come. Tonight will be even grander.” She clutched Ainsley’s hands. “Please, Desmond will listen to you. Don’t let him make us leave early.”

Torn between pleasing Edwina and getting Desmond away from the people he plotted with, Ainsley didn’t know what to say.

“Oh please, Lady Dunsmore. I’d be so ever grateful for your help.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Ainsley replied, thinking maybe the added time would give her a chance to get rid of the letter.

To most people it might be simple to ignore what they heard and destroy evidence. To Ainsley, it went against her nature to be deceitful and worried her to death that she’d make the wrong choice in what she did with the communication. She’d never had to handle any matter as serious as treason.

Edwina rewarded her with hugs and kisses.

“Oh good, here comes Harlan and Desmond now.” Edwina’s excitement showed.

Ainsley swallowed past the dryness in her throat and prepared to convince Desmond to stay when she really wanted to ask they leave that instant. However, besides her habit of hiding, she had the flaw of trying to please everyone.

“Good, you’re all here,” Desmond commented. “About our leaving. We’ll be—”

“Oh, Des, please can’t we stay?” She grabbed Ainsley’s hand. “Lady Dunsmore wishes to stay another day also.”

“She does?” Desmond’s forehead wrinkled in confusion.

“It would be a shame to miss the gala tonight,” Ainsley said with reluctance. “This is Lady Edwina’s introduction to society and if we leave

it would take her away from meeting all the prospective suitors who might attend.”

Ainsley forced a smile.

Desmond’s gaze shifted to Edwina, then back to her.

“I will think on it and let you know.” He took Ainsley’s arm.

“That means no,” Edwina grumbled. “Every time I ask for anything, you always say no. Harlan should be my guardian and not you.”

“Edwina!” Desmond’s voice boomed so not a soul within two hundred feet could miss his anger. “That will be enough of your tantrums.”

“You’re a mean bully and I can’t wait until I’m married so you haven’t any say over me.” Lady Edwina spun from him and ran along the footpath of flagstone for the terrace.

“Des, I think one day wouldn’t have mattered,” Harlan said. “It’s her first time out and about. She’s excited and—”

“Spoiled. We have indulged our dear little sister far too much and I feel sorry for the sop she marries. He’ll have no control, because I daresay she’ll select a man she can wrap around her pretty little pinky.”

“Lord Dunsmore, I’d like to stay as well.” Ainsley prayed his anger wouldn’t lash out at her for siding with Edwina. “Can we not as easily rest today, have an early evening and leave in the morning?”

“Helping to coddle my sister will not improve her future. She needs to learn she can’t always get her way and acting like a child is unacceptable.”

“If we’re leaving, I should pay my respects to a few ladies who will miss me.” Harlan gave them a bow.

“Harlan, wait.” Desmond stopped him. “We’re not leaving.”

“You just told Edwina we were.”

“Our sister needs discipline and that won’t come from saying yes to everything she asks, even if it is simple to do so.”

“Sometimes I think Edwina is right. You like being a bully for no reason other than proving you have control over her life.” Harlan stalked away.

“Desmond, if we’re not leaving, why didn’t you tell Lady Edwina?”

“She was being too demanding. If she’d have waited until I finished a sentence, she would have learned immediately. I was going to inform you all we weren’t departing today.”

“I should go see Lady Edwina. She was terribly upset and she’ll be happy to hear the news. Thank you for changing your mind.”

“Don’t give her the impression it’s because of her we’re staying, because it’s not.”

Ainsley grasped the sleeve with the note beneath. “No?”

“I’ve had a sudden meeting come up for this evening, so we’ll stay until tomorrow morning.” He stared across the lawn.

“Oh?”

“Is there something wrong with that? Just a few minutes ago you were in favor of staying.”

“No, nothing’s wrong.” She backed from him. “I should go now and tell your sister.”

Ainsley tried to keep her pace steady, but not too quick. Desmond’s surprise meeting would be with Lady Shelby. It had to be. He didn’t look her in the eye when he brought up the reason for their stay.

As she clutched her sleeve, securing the note, she reconsidered whether destroying the evidence was in her best interest. In some bizarre way, she might need the treasonous information as leverage against those that Desmond conspired with.

Chapter Twenty-one

Ainsley looked everywhere for Edwina, her room, the drawing rooms and the rose garden. Struck by the idea Edwina might be hiding, she worried she'd never find her. The notion was absurd. However, she knew how easy it was to hide and not be found.

Ainsley went up to complete strangers she had seen Edwina with and asked them until she finally got a positive response from a young couple.

"Why yes. I saw Lady Edwina go down the footpath over that way with Lord Cramden. He's such a devilishly good-looking fellow. Though, Lady Edwina should be wary of being alone with him. I heard a rumor last season how he..." She leaned and whispered the rest of the gossip in Ainsley's ear.

"Excuse me." Ainsley hurried off toward the footpath. The very idea that anyone would not be totally safe at Prince George's home was beyond her. She was so inexperienced when it came to which rumors might be true and which were simply fictitious stories blown out of proportion.

The path led to a maze of arborvitae hedges. She started in and followed the sounds of quiet laughter. A girl's distinctive giggles stayed low, hushed and moaning. Ainsley quickened her pace and while it seemed she went in circles, she knew hadn't seen some of the small statues before.

The moans grew louder and were met with those of a man's. She had not fully comprehended the songs of pleasure until she noticed the overgrown hydrangeas in the corner of the arborvitae wiggle and a bare leg extended and then retracted.

“Edwina!” Ainsley pushed the shrub aside and stepped back in astonishment at the sight of a man’s hind end.

For a moment, the sight held her captive. It wasn’t anything she ever encountered before, a man kneeling between a lady’s exposed legs while her dress was shoved up to her waist. The glimpse of blonde hair on the lady told Ainsley it was not Edwina.

Turning, Ainsley ran as fast as she could from the horrible intrusion she made on the couple fornicating in the bushes. She dashed down one path and spun into another, unable to figure out how to get out of the maze altogether. Crashing into someone, she stumbled and fell to her knees, knocking down the man as well.

“Lady Dunsmore! Whatever is wrong?” Edwina helped her up.

“Oh, I’m dreadfully sorry.” Ainsley looked at the man’s torn stocking.

“No fret, m’lady.” He got up and took her arm. “Is someone chasing you?” His gaze went past her as if an attacker were waiting to lunge. Then he bent and picked up her parasol.

“No, I... It was just...I was searching for you,” she said to Edwina while bending and rubbing a hand over her sore knee.

“You’re hurt.” The man knelt. “Shall I carry you back?”

“No. It’s nothing but a scrape.” She let him lead her down the path to a stone bench. She sat and leaned the parasol next to her.

“Lord Reginald Cramden, this is my sister-in-law, Lady Dunsmore.” Edwina sat and took Ainsley’s hand. “Why were you running? And you’re so pale.”

“I’ll go get Lord Dunsmore for you,” Lord Cramden offered. “I’ll be as quick as possible.”

“I suppose Desmond has sent out search parties for me and that is why you’re here, to drag me home.” Edwina jumped from the bench and stalked the small area like it was her cage, the hedges keeping her a prisoner from having any fun.

Ainsley noted Lord Cramden's nervousness when he hurried off. She examined Edwina's perfect attire, not a hair out of place. "I hope I haven't upset Lord Cramden."

"We were just discussing him talking to Desmond. I don't think this situation is what Lord Cramden had in mind to discuss. He's a bit afraid of my brother. If you hadn't noticed, Desmond is very harsh with his opinions."

"I don't think Lord Dunsmore will bite his head off for telling him I fell."

"It's not that. Lord Cramden has asked my permission to speak to Desmond about calling on me this season and he's worried my brother will refuse."

"Edwina, please sit." Ainsley patted the bench. "You may not appreciate me giving you advice, but I do so out of love. We have not known each other longer than a few days and still I feel like you are truly my sister and I would hope we could talk freely."

Edwina snorted with amusement. "You couldn't possibly want to think of me endearingly when I'm such a brat."

Ainsley laughed. "I do and I think if you show your maturity, you will be treated as an adult. Desmond cares a great deal for you. He doesn't do things to be mean and you shouldn't say he does. Now tell me, why is it you're out here in the hedges without an escort?"

"I didn't think anybody could find me and Lord Cramden here. Please don't tell Des we were alone. He'll be very angry and he may do something dreadful to Lord Cramden. It wasn't his fault. I made him bring me here. I said I would come with or without him and he felt obligated to be my escort."

"I've heard a rumor and... Oh, never mind."

"I know what you've heard and it isn't true. The girl who spread that vicious story did it because he's not interested in her."

"And I suppose he told you that?"

“No, the girl that told the lie was bragging to her friends and I happened to be amongst the group. She’s a horrible person and I went to Lord Cramden—”

“You went to him?”

“It seemed a perfect opportunity for me to meet him.” A big grin spread on her face. “I know it wasn’t right without a proper introduction. Anyway, after I explained to him what I’d heard, I also told him if he ever needed a witness to vouch for him, I would.”

Ainsley didn’t know which of them, her or Edwina, was more naive when it came to the actions of men. She also felt envy toward Edwina’s ease at being forward. There didn’t appear to be any shyness in Desmond’s sister.

“You shouldn’t get involved.” Ainsley thought she should offer some advice.

“Maybe you haven’t noticed, but Lord Cramden is the crème de la crème of the male population. I talked to him at length last night and I like him very much. I also think he likes me.”

“Lady Edwina, you can’t be serious about the first man you take a liking to. There are dozens upon dozens who will want you for their wife.”

“None as bold as Lord Cramden,” she sighed.

“Bold? How was he bold?”

“Before you came, he kissed me. The first I’ve ever had and it was wonderful.”

“Oh, Edwina, you shouldn’t have let him. Men take liberties and it’s only for their amusement. You should get to know a man before he kisses you. Actually, you should spend time with several before you marry.”

“And you, Lady Dunsmore, did you have many beaus and kisses?”

“I’ve only been kissed by Lord Dunsmore and I’ve had no beaus. I would not come out of hiding for one to see me.”

Edwina patted her hand. “You have found a perfect match your first time out. Maybe I can, too.”

Ainsley hugged Edwina. "If it's what you truly want then I will be happy for you. Maybe tonight we can all get to know Lord Cramden a little better."

"Hardly, since we'll be on our way home."

"About that—"

Edwina tilted her head. "Lady Dunsmore? Do you know something I do not?"

"We are not to leave until morning."

"See, I knew you could convince him."

Ainsley didn't bother to mention, if it were her decision, they'd have already left.

"What of Lord Cramden? How will I explain about being here alone with him?" She lowered her voice as a couple approached.

Ainsley recognized them immediately and her face heated and must have turned red.

"Do you know them?" Edwina tugged at her sleeve.

"No."

"Oh, your face gives away too much, Lady Dunsmore. Were they... Oh they were!" She laughed. "You've seen them in a compromising situation, haven't you?"

"Not one word, Edwina. You know yourself how rumors are hateful things."

"But that was a lie about Lord Cramden. This is the God's honest truth. Do you know who they are?"

"No, and I don't want to know."

"The man is Lord Obershaw and his wife has just recently run off with a German count. The woman, Lady Ilene Debarge, is the wife of a baron. Lord Debarge is as old as grandfather and it is said Lady Debarge married him for his money. She hopes to produce an heir to his estate, but if she's out frolicking like a little bunny in the bushes, it's hard to say whose child she'll have."

"Not a word, Edwina. Not one word of this comes from us."

“Oh, very well.”

“Ainsley.” Desmond rushed to her as if she was mortally wounded and it brought a rush of emotions to her heart.

“I’m fine. I tripped and fell while with Lord Cramden and Lady Edwina. I’m afraid I have ruined his stocking in my clumsiness.” She held Desmond’s arm. “I should go change.” She showed him where the blood seeped through her gown from her knee.

Desmond picked up her parasol and held her arm to take her back to the house.

“Lady Edwina, we’ll not be leaving until morning. You might want to come and change before we eat,” Desmond told his sister.

Ainsley poked him gently in the ribs. “Ask Lord Cramden to join us,” she whispered.

“Lord Cramden, I would be pleased to have you join us, as well.”

“Yes, Lord Dunsmore. It’d be an honor.” Lord Cramden took Edwina’s arm and followed them.

As they broke out of the maze, Ainsley glanced back, wondering why on earth anyone would find it fun to be lost in one. “Go on ahead,” she told Edwina.

“Are you all right?” Desmond held her arm as she limped. “It’s worse than you’re telling me?”

“No, m’lord. I’m quite all right. I wanted a private moment before we reach the house.” She twisted her hands around the handle of her parasol. “Edwina really likes Lord Cramden. Please let her have her fun without being... Well, don’t embarrass her.”

“Lord Cramden, I’ve heard—”

“Rumors are not always to be believed.” She hoped Edwina hadn’t misjudged Lord Cramden’s character.

“Yes, but the one circulating today amongst some groups of people does make me wonder if he should be that far ahead of us with my sister.” Desmond took her arm and proceeded to follow them.

"I understand you don't know him, but he was very helpful in getting you quickly when all I did was skin my knee."

"I've never been one to believe everything I hear. He'll get his chance to prove he's respectable." Desmond moved her along.

"Thank you, it's all I ask."

"Lord Cramden has shown some honor. I'll learn his character better with him around."

"Good, then you will let Lady Edwina have her time with him?"

"Naturally."

* * *

With Ainsley, Desmond took his sister to her room. Then led Ainsley to their suite. They had separate arrangements, of course, but joined by a small sitting area in which they could entertain if they so chose.

Desmond had yet to make use of his own bed.

"I shall only be a minute." Ainsley left the door open.

Desmond remained where he could watch her as she passed back and forth beyond the doorway, obviously gathering a change of clothes and no doubt taking them to her dressing screen.

He waited until he suspected she had undressed before he inched forward. Like a thief, he was there to steal a glance of his lovely wife.

She had her gown off. Bent over, her bottom swayed while she rolled down one of her stockings.

"I enjoy that position." He moved in behind her and grabbed her slight-curved hips.

"Desmond." Her gasp came with a smile as she looked back at him.

"I'd like to examine your knee." He turned her to face him, knelt and slid the bloodstained pantalets up.

"It's nothing, really." She put a hand on his shoulder to steady herself.

"No, I suppose not." He gazed up at her and walked his fingers along the back of her leg over the gossamer of fabric. "This item of clothing is no good with a stain and we should remove it. You can put on another."

"I agree."

He untied the ribbon to the cotton and lowered the undergarment.

"I should change all my clothes, m'lord."

His smile widened at her invitation.

He lifted her delicate foot to remove the one leg and then the other. Her supple calf briefly became a part of his hand as he rubbed the back of it to stir a shiver from her.

He pressed his mouth to her belly and both of her hands fastened on his shoulders. Pushing the chemise up, he circled her navel with kisses. He hooked a finger beneath the waistband of her underdrawers and tugged down slightly. Silky skin quivered against his tongue.

"Shall I get you out of the rest of your clothing, then?" He breathed the words against the flesh he bared at her hipbone.

He inundated her with more suckling kisses on the thin sensitive skin that stretched below her naval. The flicker of his tongue near the rim of her feminine retreat made her tremble.

"You can squeeze my shoulders if that is a yes."

Ainsley's grip tightened. Her hum encouraged him to hurry and he liked the anxious way she squirmed.

Desmond pulled her down to him. There on the floor behind the dressing screen, he devoured her moans. With her head grasped in his hands, he tasted and tortured her mouth with his lust as if she were a delicious, rare candy. He licked, thinking the sweet flavor might fade or the delightful hums die. Neither happened and he remained affixed to her lips perfectly fitted to his.

The ribbons of the chemise loosened. He rubbed over one breast and worked at getting the garment open. He didn't need it parted all the way, just a gap to reach inside and fondle her hard nipple.

"Shouldn't we...um...be on the bed?" she asked.

“Would you rather be on the bed?”

He watched the expressions change on her face. The wrinkle of her forehead hinted at confusion. The smile suggested she had an adventuresome spirit.

Desmond stood and scooped her off the floor.

“What are you doing?”

“Maybe you’re right. You and I in bed would be much more comfortable.”

Her arms tightened around him and as her lips brushed against his, a heated rush of energy shot through his limbs.

“I’m supposed to be getting changed. Won’t anyone miss us?” She swirled her fingers around his ear and playfully twisted his hair.

“Probably. That’s all the more reason for us to tarry.”

She pulled on the lock between her fingers. “You’re a mischievous rascal, Lord Dunsmore.”

“And you, Lady Dunsmore, are worth every moment I spend looking for you behind doors.”

“Oh, Desmond, I’m sorry I do that.”

“Don’t be, it’s part of who you are.”

He captured her kiss, drawing her lips between his as he carried her toward the bed, never letting her mouth part from his.

She snuggled closer, looking to mold to him. A knock at the door stopped him from taking her to the bed.

“Excuse me.” He gave a sigh for the lost moment as he stood her on the floor and gazed at her heaving bosom.

Her face had a flushed, rosy glow and he hated to pry himself away from her.

Chapter Twenty-two

The door closed and Ainsley hurried to listen. She snatched the drinking glass to hold up to the wood. The voices outside were mumbled and she suspected Desmond was in the corridor instead of the sitting room.

When she didn't hear what was said, she stooped down to peer through the keyhole.

"Nothing," she groaned, seeing only blackness.

Abruptly, the door swung open. She moved to hide the glass behind her back except Desmond's arm circled her. He took the glass and sat it on the table.

"Edwina would be proud to have made you an apt pupil of her spy techniques." He grinned.

"I was just...curious." She bit her bottom lip and held still as his gaze lowered to the gap of her chemise.

He took hold of her shoulders and kissed her firmly on the mouth. His ardor stole her breath and chased away her thoughts.

"I have some business to attend to and it can't wait. Unfortunate that it is, but I shall see you downstairs in a while for the luncheon?"

Ainsley nodded and when he leaned forward to kiss her again, she put her hands on his sides to be part of the experience instead of a mute recipient of the affection. She stepped closer and was rewarded by his embrace.

His kiss deepened and her need of him grew.

"Don't go." She worried about the kind of dealings he had.

"It's important."

She slipped her arms around his back and hugged him. The beat of his heart drummed inside his chest. She put the side of her head upon the echoing sound.

“If I could stay, I would.” He pulled away.

“Desmond.”

“I’ll see you soon.”

Ainsley had no say. He left and she returned to her dressing screen to put on fresh clothes. When she saw the crumpled piece of paper fall out of her discarded dress, she felt a nervous flutter in her stomach. The thing had to be the most dangerous little note anyone could ever have in their possession.

Carefully, she folded it into a tiny square and hid it in the bottom of her jewelry casket. She’d do whatever it took to keep Desmond safe, even from his own foolish actions.

It didn’t take long to get everything in the room in order before she went to look for Desmond. She tried not to hurry down the stairs. Poise and grace, her mother would have reminded her. Yet, the foyer contained just him and she trotted down like a happy dog to her master.

It surprised her to see him in the foyer. His warm smile made her blush. His familiarity with her body left her with an intense need to be close to him.

Desmond thought nothing of holding her face and kissing her. “I thought you might take longer.”

“Were you not waiting for me?”

He glanced over her shoulder and stood straighter. When she turned, she saw Lady Shelby.

“Lord Dunsmore, how are you this afternoon?” Lady Shelby gave a sly smile. “I haven’t met your lovely wife.”

Ainsley held Desmond’s arm tighter and his fingers covered hers.

“Lady Shelby, may I introduce my wife, Lady Dunsmore.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Lady Dunsmore. Des...Lord Dunsmore and I are old friends.”

Ainsley painted a fake smile on her face, nodded with a polite tip of her head, but she refused to carry on a conversation with Desmond's mistress.

"Maybe over lunch we could exchange secrets about your husband." Lady Shelby gave a laugh and Ainsley cringed as the woman walked away.

"Your mistress will be joining us?" She shrugged off Desmond's touch and stepped back.

"She is not my mistress and I have to ask something extremely important of you."

"I'm waiting." She tapped a foot while his hand stroked up and down her sides.

"For a very serious business reason, I must not insult Nellie. I ask that you do not either, no matter what she says or does." He fingered a wisp of her hair near her cheek. "Please, Ainsley?"

"Will you have to kiss her again?"

She could hold her tongue if it was important to him. She didn't like to talk to strangers anyway. Yet, as of late, she had found her voice very forceful if someone threatened Desmond.

"A good question, direct and to the point. I'd like to say no. I'd like to lie through my teeth and say anything that I think you'll believe just so it doesn't hurt you. Unfortunately, I can't do that to you."

"Will you have to sleep with her as well?" She watched his eyes flicker with surprise at the severity of the question. "Never mind. I don't want to know. I only hope you'll not embarrass me or our name with a public display."

"No." He gripped her upper arm. "I will never sleep with her."

She twisted away wanting to trust him. Walking to the table where she saw Lady Shelby join Harlan, Ainsley decided it best to stay close enough to see the interaction between Desmond and the lady.

"Lady Dunsmore, don't you look lovely this afternoon." Harlan stood and pulled a chair out for her.

Desmond snatched it from him to push in for her. She had made him angry and didn't care. The humiliation she felt sitting to eat with a woman he'd slept with made her extremely uneasy. However, while she didn't like what he asked of her, she didn't want to come between him and his business affairs. Even if those undertakings required the dubious platonic acquaintance of Lady Nellie Shelby.

"Hello," Edwina bubbled, joining them.

Ainsley returned the smile, absorbing a sliver of the joy she saw in Edwina. It was only a moment because Edwina's gay façade vanished when she looked from Ainsley to Nellie and back.

Edwina's face expressed knowledge of Desmond's association with the woman. Whether by fact or rumor, it wasn't clear, but Ainsley leaned toward Lord Harlan for protection. He sat between her and Lady Shelby. Harlan would make the best shield since Desmond obviously had no problem in flaunting the woman beneath her nose.

"Lady Shelby, you know my sister, but have you met Lord Cramden?" Lord Harlan stood again to wait for Edwina to be seated.

Ainsley glanced behind him, studying Nellie, unnoticed. She was beautiful, but not overly so that men should want to gawk as Lord Cramden did. She was slender and one might even say too skinny, yet it fit her height.

Ainsley took a discreet look at Desmond and smiled. He didn't give Lady Shelby the same adoring attention as Lord Harlan and Lord Cramden.

Lady Edwina, ever the diplomat, tried to act disinterested in what Lady Shelby said to her. Unfortunately, it fascinated Edwina to no end to be complimented by another woman and Ainsley felt herself losing an ally in Edwina.

A servant bowed between her and Desmond. He offered a selection of fish and she shook her head to pass on the salmon.

"You don't like fish?" Desmond took a healthy portion for himself.

"Yes, except not right now." She didn't feel hungry.

She passed on the beef, the quail and the lamb.

“Are you not well?” His whisper tickled her ear.

“I’m not hungry. Is that all right?” She put her hand over his on the table. “I’m sorry.”

“Maybe you’d prefer desserts.” He motioned for a steward to bring the cart filled with pastries.

Ainsley didn’t want anything for fear of her nervous stomach. Lady Shelby’s sidelong glances at her were not tactful.

“Make a selection,” Desmond coaxed when the servant bowed with a tray of delicious chocolates, dainty petit fours and scrumptious pastries.

“No, thank you.”

“Oh, leave her be, Desmond. Obviously, your wife can’t eat much and keep that darling trim and childlike figure. She’s sweet with her pixie face and the innocent eyes of youth.”

“Come now, m’lady,” Lord Harlan addressed Nellie. “Admit you are envious of Lady Dunsmore, as well as the Lady Edwina. Their youth is something you’ll never see again.” His teasing laugh made the comment sound inoffensive. “I can say I regret years passing me by.”

Lord Harlan lifted his glass and motioned for the others to do the same. Ainsley felt rescued by Harlan.

“I say, we all should make the best of what we hold dear to our hearts and never fret about how things are different than we anticipated.” He nodded toward Ainsley, with a glance at Desmond.

“Well spoken, Lord Harlan,” Lady Shelby cheered and clinked her glass to his.

“Yes, my brother the speechmaker does say something sensible once in a while.” Desmond tapped his glass to Harlan’s, and with great purpose, he tapped Ainsley’s and bypassed Nellie’s.

“You all speak as if I were ten,” Edwina groaned.

“I think you are of a perfect age, Lady Edwina,” Lord Cramden voiced.

Ainsley watched the couple throughout the meal. They were falling in love and it was a wondrous thing to see of two people.

"I suggest since we all might feel younger, we go to my suite and have a private and entertaining round of charades," Lady Shelby announced.

"A fabulous idea," Lord Harlan exclaimed. "Desmond is utterly horrible at acting out clues and to spare you of his blunders, Lady Dunsmore, I should like to be your partner."

"Oh, very cunning, Lord Harlan." Lady Shelby stood and the men rose out of respect. "I suppose Lady Edwina will commandeer Lord Cramden. That, my darling Lord Dunsmore, leaves just you and me."

Harlan took Ainsley's elbow and she rose at the gentle urging. Inside her head she screamed, *wait!* When did she get to voice her opinion? She didn't want to play a game. She didn't even care to be within a hundred yards of Lady Shelby. And how in the world had she let Harlan pair Desmond with the spider who wove the webbed trap?

"I've never been good at this game, m'lord," Ainsley hurriedly told him in a whisper.

"No matter, I'll be the best at providing you with all the dramatics of a seasoned actor." Harlan held her arm tighter.

She wondered if his grip was firmer because he feared she'd run off to hide. While it had crossed her mind, she had a greater urge to keep an eye on the vixen draping herself too familiarly over Desmond's arm. Even if she begged to go to her room, she worried Desmond might stay with the Lady Shelby. For the time being, going along seemed the best way to keep track of Desmond.

What she didn't understand was what he had ever seen in the woman. She was shallower than a puddle after a spring rain. If she had any real beauty, it would be hard to tell from the one she had painted on with rouge. And the powdered wig, did it hide a bald head? Ainsley snickered and Harlan put a hand to the small of her back.

"Have you thought of something funny or are you merely letting off a little tension in the form of a personal titter?"

She put a hand to her mouth. "I... It was a silly thought."

"Tell. Your secret is safe with me." He leaned his head near hers.

"I just wondered if Lady Shelby had hair and what she'd look like bald." She didn't know what made her trust him with such an outrageous theory, but he had proved to be her friend.

Harlan let out a thunderous bellow that made her cringe.

"Stop," she pleaded.

"Let us in on the joke." Lady Edwina tugged his jacket as they reached the landing.

"No." He looked back at her. "It's personal and only Lady Dunsmore and myself will be privileged." He bowed and put a hand again to Ainsley's back.

"For your information, I have seen she has hair," he whispered in Ainsley ear. "However, it's not a very pretty color, something of a mousy shade of brown. I suppose it could be graying now and that's why she wears that wig."

* * *

Desmond stopped at the door of Lady Shelby's suite. He let her go in ahead of him, then motioned Harlan to go next, leaving Ainsley behind. Edwina danced past them with her beau as if Lord Cramden were the only person in sight.

"I can take you to your room if you'd rather not stay," he told Ainsley, concerned she had been reeled into something she didn't want to do.

She hadn't eaten, she'd only taken a small sip of the champagne and she was ashen. Not good things for the petite and bashful lady.

"Lord Harlan seems too enthused for me to spoil his fun," she explained sheepishly.

"You and my brother seem to have formed a very friendly bond."

"He's been exceptionally nice. I like him very much, but if it's a problem, I'll try to curb the attention he gives to me."

"I wasn't accusing you of anything. I'm afraid he might overwhelm you with his energy. He's always a fun-and-games chap and you...well, I didn't think you would be."

"I explained I wasn't any good at games, yet he doesn't appear to care." She shrugged.

"Very well," he sighed. "Just don't let him exhaust you. I wouldn't want you to be in a position where you couldn't excuse yourself."

"You mean run."

"M'lady, I only think of your welfare." He bowed and took her arm. "You have on an enchanting fragrance. What's it called?"

"It's only scented soap. I haven't any perfume." She walked with him into the sitting room.

"Why not?"

Women in general had a dozen perfumes and scented waters to enhance their smell. That Ainsley did not, intrigued him until he heard her answer.

"I've never had a reason to have any. No one would notice when I make myself scarce all the time." She sat on the edge of the chair and smoothed over the wrinkles in her dress.

Nellie stared at her as she spoke. "Do go first, Lord Harlan."

He jumped to his feet.

"Now you must guess with no more than five tries, Lady Dunsmore, or we shall lose points," Harlan told Ainsley.

"Here, sit next to me," Nellie encouraged Desmond as she patted the space on the settee beside her.

"I'm quite comfortable standing." Desmond placed a hand on Ainsley's shoulder as he stood behind her chair.

Harlan gave Ainsley clues and acted out his subject with great animation, making everyone laugh.

"Three words." He rubbed his sleeve as if he were polishing something.

"Shine," Ainsley tried and he shook his head before she could say something else. He held his hand up and made a cradle of his arms and rocked an imaginary infant.

"New?" she said slowly.

"Yes." Harlan then made a motion that was easy.

"Gate." She smiled.

Desmond's grip tightened and she reached up, prying his fingers loose to slip hers beneath.

"Not appropriate," Desmond grumbled.

Harlan stood still.

"Newgate Prison?" Ainsley asked.

"Very good, Lady Dunsmore. You managed it in three guesses," Nellie praised.

"That's not three words," Edwina piped up, turning her gaze from Lord Cramden.

"We still get the points as she guessed correctly," Harlan declared.

"I think it's cheating, somehow." She folded her arms together.

"No, no, m'lady, Lord Harlan is in the right." Lord Cramden patted her shoulder from where he was perched on the arm of her chair.

"Then we'll just have to do better." Edwina pushed Lord Cramden to take his turn.

"Edwina, behave." Desmond scowled.

"You're only agreeing it was fair because she's your wife."

Desmond pulled his shoulders back and Ainsley rose quickly.

"M'lord, I'm tired. I'd like to return to my room now for a nap." Ainsley put a hand up to touch him and then let it drop.

He knew she didn't want to be there and didn't understand why she agreed in the first place. After seeing her glance at Nellie, he decided it was her curiosity about a woman she believed threatened her position with him.

“Lord Harlan, see that Lady Edwina—” He stopped himself from saying that she should behave herself.

Ainsley moved for the door and he followed.

“Good afternoon.” He bowed to the others.

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” Ainsley apologized once they were in the hallway.

“You were right to distract my anger. Lady Edwina is too outspoken for her own good and she shouldn’t have complained.”

“I do think she only got carried away. She wishes to impress Lord Cramden.”

“Ainsley, you have nothing to worry about where Lady Shelby is concerned.”

“I wasn’t,” she replied rather fast.

Her quick pace away from him contradicted her statement.

Chapter Twenty-three

Desmond stayed with Ainsley in their sitting room for a few hours. He sat at the desk writing the letter he misplaced. Ainsley sat in a chair reading. He wasn't sure she pretended to be engrossed by the book until a half hour passed and she hadn't turned a single page.

After sunset, when it neared the late-night supper hour, he picked up his jacket and put it on. "Are you sure you wouldn't like to go to supper?"

"No, I'm not hungry and it's late. I've never cared to eat an evening meal at this hour. Lunch was sufficient."

"You hardly ate anything."

"I had enough."

Desmond frowned. He knew he wasn't going to get her out of the room. She liked solitude. While it worked out better for him that she didn't want to go, he knew she'd brood about what he was doing out of her sight. Nevertheless, he had a note to deliver and he didn't want Ainsley involved.

"I'll send a servant with some food in case you change your mind."

When Desmond stole quietly back into the suite later, he found Ainsley asleep on the settee. The book she'd been reading lay on the floor where it had slipped from her hand. He hadn't intended to let the hours pass well beyond the dinner hour. However, the unavoidable and tedious conversation with Nellie made him lose track of time.

"You make a man sorry there is business greater than tending to you," he whispered and picked her up.

"Desmond?" She yawned and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"You should have gone to bed." He carried her into her bedchamber and folded back the white duvet to place her beneath.

"Where were you?"

"I had a meeting, remember? I mentioned it this morning and it took longer than expected." He untied his cravat and tossed it on a chair.

How would he keep her safe from scandal if it should come to light what he'd been up to?

"I remember." She opened her eyes and rose on one elbow. "Did it go well?"

"Yes." He pulled off his boots and trousers.

The night had been long and the hint of morning already peeked through the window with the glow of sun on the horizon. He walked to the bed hoping to get a few hours sleep while holding Ainsley.

"Who were you with?"

"Hmmm... You put me ill at ease, m'lady. My business, and it was strictly business mind you, was with Lady Shelby." He lifted the cover to crawl in bed with her.

Ainsley had different plans and he watched her slip out from under the duvet he held up. She strolled away from the bed and sat at the vanity. Taking her brush from the silver tray, she stroked down the long tresses of her hair.

"Is she who the letter was for?" She glanced over her shoulder at him.

"The letter?"

He sat on the bed with a hand to the warm spot she had left. She didn't answer and it drew his attention to what she'd said.

Desmond wrinkled his forehead as he stared at her mirrored image. "You found the letter I thought I lost."

It came as a relief. However, her grim disappointment chilled him to the core. She sat unmoving, unresponsive and grave.

"Ainsley?"

Her brow furrowed and she nodded. "It's treason."

“What are you going to do?” He watched the answers unfold in her troubled eyes. “You can’t tell anyone. It would—”

“You’ve got yourself in a pickle, Lord Dunsmore. I should leave you to stew until you see that what you’re engaged in is wrong.”

“But?” He saw the worry in her gaze.

“I’ll not say anything.” She rushed behind the dressing screen. “You are my husband. Thus, I have no choice other than to be loyal to you.”

She gave the statement, void of emotion. He fell back on the pillow exhausted by stress. Closing his eyes to block out the light of day, he hoped to also forget the shame she made him feel.

When Ainsley came from behind the screen, she was fully clothed. She sat again in front of the mirror and worked at coiling her hair up and fastening it in a mass of beautifully spiraled curls.

He sat when she picked up a hat and placed it on her head.

“Where are you going? It’s extremely early yet.”

“I wish to go for a walk and since we’ll be leaving this morning...”

“We’ll be staying one more night,” he informed her.

“You said we’d leave today.”

“Edwina has managed to wangle another day out of me.” He couldn’t tell her his business wasn’t concluded, so he lied hoping she didn’t confer with his sister regarding the reason they didn’t leave.

Ainsley put a hand on the door handle. “I don’t know how to trust you, m’lord, but I assure you, I’ll keep my word to not say anything.”

She opened the door and left quietly. Desmond rubbed his eyes with painful despair. He’d lost something he had no idea he wanted so much. Ainsley was like a warm wind that swept through his heart and he had inadvertently shut her out.

* * *

Ainsley took no notice of anyone other than servants moving about the house. She blindly walked the corridors until she escaped outside.

It seemed endless hours ago since she had tried to hide behind draperies or duck behind the shrubbery. Yet, it was her first instinct when she heard familiar voices.

“Desmond doesn’t seem to have his heart in our relationship anymore, Harlan.” Lady Shelby’s tone wasn’t as depressed as it should have been.

Ainsley would have liked the claim, if Lady Shelby hadn’t made reference to there having been a relationship.

“If you expect things to go as smoothly as they did before he married, then you can forget it,” Lord Harlan told her. “He doesn’t want Ainsley involved and she must never suspect what’s going on between the two of you. Flaunting your relationship in front of her upsets him. You don’t want to get on Desmond’s bad side, not here at least.”

Too late, Lord Harlan. What little trust Ainsley had clung to that her husband could ever love her, dissipated with the knowledge of his continuing relationship with Lady Shelby.

Ainsley rubbed a finger under her nose and yearned to be someplace else. She wished she had never laid eyes on Desmond Rawlington, the Marquess of Dunsmore.

“That little snippet of a girl can’t possibly know or even suspect anything, Harlan. She’s scared of her own shadow. I have yet to understand why Desmond married her.” Nellie clucked with disgust.

Anger began to boil in Ainsley. If it were possible to turn Lady Shelby into a toad, she’d hardly hesitate.

Standing erect like a statue, she bided her time under the branches of the yew and waited. The evergreen wafted pleasantly around her while she forced herself to listen to the conversation she shouldn’t have been privy to.

“Lady Dunsmore is not an imbecile, Nellie. Don’t interpret her shyness as stupidity. If anything, she hears, observes and learns more than any of us because she doesn’t fill the air with idle chatter,” Lord Harlan defended.

Ainsley's heart lurched with the affection she all but thought she had lost for her brother-in-law.

"So the little darling has turned your head, as well."

"Not in the way you mean," he answered. "She's a member of my family and I'm proud of that fact. She brings honor to our name by her virtuous presence. Something Desmond knew you could not."

"I'll not give him up, Harlan."

Ainsley waited a few minutes after she was sure they had left. She stepped out to the path and met Harlan standing before the fountain. He turned and smiled. Then it faded as he figured out she had not just come along.

"How long were you there in the bushes?" he asked sharply.

"I wasn't...I just..." She flinched when he approached and raised a hand to her.

"Ainsley." He appeared shocked. "I'd never strike you or any other woman." He plucked the green nettles from her shoulder.

"I didn't mean to listen."

"I can explain."

"You can tell me a lie, but I already know my husband's affair with Lady Shelby has not ended." She turned away, not wishing to cry in front of him.

"He has no feelings for her." Harlan took her arms and turned her around. "He's never cared for any woman before you."

"It's nice of you to say. Your loyalty to him is admirable."

"I'd not lie to you about something as important as your position in our family."

"Yes, and it's not very good of me to stick my nose where it shouldn't be."

He pulled her against him and rubbed her back. She felt comfortable against him. He had a way of making her feel safe, just like Desmond did at times.

“Utter nonsense. Questioning everything you don’t understand can never be a bad thing. Showing support for Desmond helps him.”

“Oh yes, I’m such a marvel that my husband has another woman.”

“Ainsley, he’s not doing anything with Nellie. I swear.”

Her cheeks flushed.

“You can tell me anything, you know. Even secrets you wish not to share with Desmond.” He rubbed the back of his finger over her hot cheek.

Ainsley smiled. “You’re my biggest secret, Lord Harlan, and I’ll always trust you to let me hide behind you.”

He laughed and hugged her to him. “Forever, m’lady. Forever I am your servant and...” He lifted her chin with the bend of his finger. “I am your brother, no less than I am to Edwina, all right?”

“Thank you.” She kissed his cheek and looped her arm around his. “So will you take me into breakfast? I’m starving.”

“I’d be absolutely delighted.”

As they walked, Ainsley listened with interest as Harlan told her one story after another about him and Desmond. She envied their close relationship. It appeared nothing like the strained one she and her sister Rowena shared.

* * *

Desmond didn’t want to believe what he saw. He leaned his head back against the tree he hid behind and tried to think why his wife and his brother were spending so much time holding each other.

He trusted his brother, and yet, it gave him pause to wonder if his association with Nellie hadn’t forced his wife to seek solace with another man.

Hours went by, and each time he thought he could face Ainsley, he feared he’d say the wrong thing and upset her more than he already had. He found it best to avoid her.

The only thing to ease his turmoil came in the form of a decanter filled with port. He drank heavily, hoping to clear his head and find a solution to all his problems.

Avoiding people throughout the day reminded him of Ainsley. He appreciated her need for seclusion since seeking the same. Missing meals wasn't a problem. Missing Ainsley had him eventually returning to their suite.

The darkened windows were void of light and the lamps were turned low. He went to Ainsley's room with some odd notion to catch her with his brother, yet he found she lay in bed asleep and very much alone.

"Ainsley." He walked to the bed.

She sat up and he caught sight of her alarm.

"Undress," he commanded while stripping free of his clothes. Touching her seemed the best solution to dispel his jealousy. Once he held her so their flesh kissed from head to toe, he'd not think about what he perceived to be an exaggerated amount of fondness between two people he cared about.

Her fingers clutched the front of her nightgown as her head shook emphatically.

"You're drunk." She didn't tell him anything he didn't already know.

Desmond had thought to go about everything with care, except he'd had too much to drink to say anything right. The expression of horror on Ainsley's face sobered him. He stopped just shy of peeling off his breeches and sat on the side of the bed.

"I'm sorry."

She surprised him by scooting forward and putting a hand over his. He turned his palm up under hers. If he didn't look, she'd not flee. He had learned and liked the shyness in Ainsley's touch. He lifted his hand and kissed the smoothness of her knuckles.

She responded with a shiver. Not of fear, he hoped, but excitement. She made long strokes over his back with a calming gentleness only a woman had in her touch. Outlining the muscles made tense by his assumptions, she relaxed him.

"I saw you today with Harlan," he commented.

"He kindly spent a lot of time with me since you were nowhere to be found."

The massage of her fingers on his shoulder felt good. Her kiss followed and he closed his eyes. He didn't think he'd ever experienced anything more sensual than her breath warming his ear.

"I need you, Desmond," she whispered and ran her tongue along the rim of his ear.

Ainsley had perfected seduction and Desmond twisted, tugging her around him until she sat on his lap. She draped her arms over his shoulders. Her fingers burrowed into his hair and she smiled with her eyes closed.

"My dear sweet, sweet Ainsley." He put his forehead against hers. "I fail you every day."

"Why?"

"By marrying you under false pretenses." Not that he couldn't love her, he did. He didn't know how to be a decent husband and the stress of juggling a bad life while trying to give her a good one, made him crazy.

"I've no regrets."

"You've been unexpectedly perfect."

"That's the drink talking, m'lord. You can't possibly think I'm perfect. Not when you compare me to Lady Shelby."

"She has nothing, as far as I'm concerned. If business didn't put us together, I'd not have a word to say to her."

Ainsley smoothed a hand over his cheek.

"I hate to think I've hurt you." He watched her blue eyes sparkle in the lamplight.

He rubbed her back.

"I overheard her say she'd not give you up."

"Ambitious, isn't she?" He kissed her lightly. "She always seemed intelligent. I thought my marriage would have been a clear-enough message."

“What message is that?”

He sucked at her lips, finding the flavor of her mouth minty.

“I don’t want her. I never want anyone but you.”

Ainsley deserved everything the ton had to offer, and in his position, Desmond could give her whatever she wanted. They had the money to travel the world or build their own. He’d encourage her to have parties, if she wanted them, or he would hide in her bedchambers with her. Everything he did from this moment on, he would do with a devotion to her.

He lay back on the bed bringing Ainsley down on his shoulder. He felt he might have ruined his night with her until her fingers made soothing, circling motions down his abdomen. His cock sprang to life and pushed at the cloth of his underdrawers.

She rubbed lower and the tips of her fingers slipped under the waistband. Her movements weren’t mindless caresses as she touched the base of his cock. He shivered as she withdrew.

“Oh, God.” Immediately, he put his hand over her wrist. “Don’t stop.”

“I hadn’t intended to, m’lord.” Her lips parted and he kissed her.

She pulled the ties of his underdrawers loose.

The pressure built and blood, fevered with excitement, rushed through his veins as she fondled him. Her pace picked up and his sweet, gentle wife became unusually aggressive with her tugs and strokes.

“Make love to me.” She bit his bottom lip. “I want to feel you inside me.”

Desmond gripped her jaw and held her face away. “I know I’ve been drinking, but have you?”

She smiled seductively and shook her head. “I want to make you forget her.”

He felt the air in his lungs disappear and leave him with such an ache he didn’t think he could speak. Her insecurities were his fault and he hated he hadn’t been able to make her trust he’d be a faithful husband.

"Ainsley, only you, my sweet, are the one always in my thoughts. Even when I'm not near you, I can't stop wondering what you're doing or if you're all right. There is not now, or ever going to be anyone who will come between what we have."

"But she—"

"*She* will soon be completely out of our lives."

Ainsley's fingers involuntarily squeezed and his mind jumped to a new area of consideration.

"If you keep that up, I won't be able to think at all."

"Would you take your clothes off so I can look at you?"

She need not ask twice. He shoved them down and kicked them off. It brought a giggle from her and then a sigh. He said nothing to distract her curious inspection.

Leaning over him, she kissed his abdomen. Her hair, sliding over his skin, tickled.

"Is there anywhere I shouldn't touch?" Her fingers combed into the hair surrounding his erection.

"No." He gulped.

"I can do whatever I want?" She snatched at the patch and tugged.

He made a sound of approval and nothing more. Right about the same time, her lips made a sucking kiss to the side of his shaft. From there he lost thought. He couldn't remember if she sucked on the head of his cock before she licked his balls or if it was reversed.

Her hot breath fanning over his groin made him crazy. Her licks and kisses continued. The way her fingers moved and her hand massaged, he knew he'd not hold back his spending for long. It made him hotter to think how the creamy gush of fluids would look dripping from her lips.

She took him into the narrow chute of her throat. Deep, clenching swallows pumped his veins. He gripped her hair and tried to make himself hold her at bay. He couldn't. Her head bobbed up and down and he lay immobilized.

Desmond thought his animal sounds would frighten her into stopping. They only made her greedier.

"I'm going to come, Ainsley," he moaned.

She twisted his shaft, kneading his engorged sac.

"Oh God, it feels so good."

Faster, harder, she worked at his cock and it made him sweat. Tremors fluttered through his stomach. His skin quivered.

"Ainsley, please, please don't stop," he begged.

Could he be a man and make her drink of him without her knowing it would come to that.

"Ainsley, that's enough." He went to pull her up and the pop of her mouth from his cock detonated the explosive rush of sperm.

He couldn't prevent her from pushing her lips back over the head. His hips jerked and thrust. The heated juices ejaculated inside her mouth and she hummed with a delight that surprised him.

He pulled her down on the bed and kissed her. Fully devouring every last trace of himself on her tongue, he ignored her blush.

"Where did you learn to do that?" He held her face so she couldn't look away.

"When I hide, m'lord, I see things and hear details about what a man likes."

He couldn't stop her from closing her eyes or prevent the red in her cheeks from deepening. Dragging his lips over the heated skin, he coaxed her with kisses to look at him.

"Did I do it right?" The sweetness of her worry touched him.

"Perfect," he whispered. "You are perfect."

Throughout the night, Desmond made love to her. Sometimes, they had the wildness of animals mating, and sometimes, they went slow and gentle with an unhurried need to finish. By morning, when he opened his eyes, he felt a happy exhaustion through all his limbs.

Sunlight streamed through the windows too brightly and he groaned from its intrusion. His headache didn't help. Curled up next to him, the

sight of Ainsley eased all pains and he watched her slow, steady breathing.

This would be the day he ended all ties to his problem and devoted himself to making her happy. He didn't think of the danger he put himself in by breaking his association with the group. He just knew the time had come to sever the relationships he had with the wrong kind of people.

Chapter Twenty-four

Ainsley paced along the edge of the pond watching Desmond. He had left her again for some secret meeting and when he returned he was angry. Since Harlan had gone with him, she knew he wouldn't have been with Lady Shelby alone.

"Desmond, I do think you should stop drinking." She watched him toss the decanter away.

"None left." He flopped back on the grass.

"Won't you tell me what's upset you?"

"I'm not at liberty to share."

She remained quiet and stared, wishing she knew what to do or say to help.

"You look at me as if you know all my secrets already."

"I don't know all."

"You know enough." He laughed and pointed his finger at her. "You hear things from those corners in which you hide, remember. Don't think I don't know what you're up to. My grandfather can be very persuasive and if you think you'll learn everything then you're wrong. Some things are never spoken of so there is no chance of my secret getting to the wrong ears."

"What are you talking about?"

"The duke set up this marriage arrangement. He did it to spy on me and I've figured that out."

"You were supposed to marry my sister."

"Was I? Do you even have a sister?"

“Yes, her name is Rowena.” She looked at him and it dawned on her how he could think what he did. She had heard the duke talk of spies and the like.

“I didn’t think about it before I talked to Nellie this morning, but your sister could be part of the story. Your mother knew what your father had been up to, too. She could have been just as big a part of all the schemes, as well. Why did she go to France? I often ask myself that question.”

“And your answer is made from what comes from a bottle, Lord Dunsmore.”

“I don’t know about that. Maybe the drinking frees my mind to look at situations from a different angle. It could have been the secret behind your father and my father’s plans.”

“You’ve drunk too much. My father drank himself to death and left us with nothing. There’s no magic in being a sot!” She found herself shouting and she rarely raised her voice to anyone.

He looked up with surprise.

“I’ll trust you to do what is right,” she said quieter.

“Trust!” he burst out. “Don’t trust anyone, Ainsley. Even the devil has ways to make things appear right.”

“I trust you.” She walked back down to the water’s edge. “From that moment you let me out of my mother’s drawing room unseen by her, I’ve trusted you even though you’ve often made me doubt it.”

She had small wavering moments, but the trust was there. It had rooted before she knew the bad things. Even then, those were problems out of his control.

“You’re too caring, Ainsley. You’ll only get hurt.”

She looked back at him. He got up and walked to her. She closed her eyes to his gentle caress along her jaw.

“My sweet, innocent Ainsley, you shame me to no end with your kindness and I fear I’ll break your heart one day.”

"That you may, if you ever stop wanting to kiss me." She put a hand on his chest.

"You're a romantic and that's a bad thing when the world is filled with problems."

"You're not taking a hint very well." She lifted her lashes and by her gaze, she implored him to kiss her. If only he noticed how much her desperate heart belonged to him, things would look hopeful for them.

Desmond scooped her up and the thrill of him holding her close set her pulse racing with a wild heat.

"Let's go swimming." He trudged into the water.

"Desmond, no!"

"You don't swim?"

"Yes, but..." She looked at the surface he held her over.

"Do you never wish to do something spontaneously for the fun?"

"All the time, except you know I don't like putting myself in situations where people will stare at me."

"It's just me and you, Ainsley, and I want to show you how much fun we can have together."

"Does it have to be today?" She glanced around them. "It'll be too cold."

"It's the middle of summer, and thus it will never be any warmer than right now."

Ainsley squealed as Desmond tossed her into the water. He dove under right alongside her. When he surfaced, he shook his dark mahogany locks so water sprayed at her.

"Now tell me how it's too cold." He stood and tugged off his cravat and unbuttoned his vest, throwing both to shore.

"Whatever will people say when we return." She looked down at the transparent fabric of her gown.

"I'll tell them my wife fell in the pond, of course." He waded toward her. "I'll tell them I had no choice but to jump in and rescue her."

She backed away as he approached with a wicked twinkle in his eye. Ainsley didn't know how much more she could take of Desmond's mischievous kind of fun.

"I'll be a hero." He continued removing clothing.

"Desmond? Desmond, what are you doing?"

He peeled his wet shirt from his brawny chest.

"Desmond, you've had too much to drink and you're...you're..."

His intent got clearer the longer he stared.

"I want you." He untied his breeches.

"Desmond we're in a pond and I...don't...think... Oh!"

He bent forward and from the motion of his arms, she guessed he was removing all his clothing. When he stood, he had his shoes, breeches, everything he had worn, in his hands. He flung the items to shore.

"You're naked."

"Yes, and you're too overdressed for this to be any fun." The water sloshed around his sculpted, bronze torso.

His arms wrapped around her and she had no wish to struggle.

"You're not thinking to—"

He plucked the combs and pins from her hair. The tendrils spilled down like a shawl around her shoulders.

"Those were my best ivory combs, Desmond." She watched them float away.

"I'll buy you new, prettier, more costly combs if you'll forget about those." His fingers ran through her hair and she glimpsed her russet curls twist around his strong grasp.

He unbuttoned the back of her gown and slowly pulled it off her shoulders. His lips followed the garment. She whimpered, shivered and watched the lawns stretching up the slope toward the Prince Regent's summer home. Someone was bound to come along the same path they followed to the water.

"I want you totally naked." He jerked her gown down and moved behind her.

"Desmond, you can't. Not here."

"I want to taste your sweet flesh," he rasped against the back of her shoulder as he kissed the fabric away.

Ainsley threw back her head when he leaned his chin on her shoulder. He tugged the gown down to free her arms. Rubbing over the flimsy cotton chemise, he made her nipples hard. When he extricated her breasts from the garment, his fingers became weapons of the sweetest kind of torture—pulling at her nipples until they ached. He squeezed, shaped and molded her flesh to his liking. He groaned against her neck and pressed his hand to her belly as he kneaded her breast.

He untied the points to her pantalets and soon his fingers crawled over her hips beneath the fabric.

"I'm going to remove these." He slid them down into the water.

Ainsley couldn't refuse even if she wanted to. Her voice no longer worked. She closed her eyes and tried not to think of her clothes floating. He snatched them in one grasp and hurled them to shore with everything else.

Desmond moved in close to Ainsley. He pushed his touch between her legs and opened her with searching fingers. Massaging the quivering folds of flesh, he pulled her back into his hard cock, teasing the cleft of her bare bottom. He fingered her until she shook within his arms. Then he turned her around.

"You've pretty tits." He lifted one. "One day I should like to slide my cock between them. Will you let me do that, Ainsley?" He ran his fist up and down between her breasts. "Will you let me fuck you here, between your succulent breasts?"

The sound of her surprise caught in her throat.

Desmond slid his hands down over her firm bottom. "I'm going to lift you up." He kissed her. "Wrap your legs around my waist."

The water made her buoyant and he hoisted her as high as his waist. Her smooth limbs fastened around him.

“Now what?” She smiled.

He kissed her again and this time, when thrusting his tongue in and out of her mouth, he rocked her. His shaft rubbed her quivering belly, adding to the stimulation.

“Desmond, this is outrageous,” she panted when he released her to take a breath.

He carried her to shore, to a soft patch of grass.

“It’s cold,” she giggled and lowered her legs.

“I’ll make you warm.” He knelt between her knees.

She aroused him with her heart-shaped mouth and he couldn’t wait to get into her.

He drew her knees up and sank into the heated center.

“What if someone sees us?”

“Then I’ll hide you under me.”

“But it would be humiliating.”

He rubbed his hands over her thighs as he pushed each stroke deeper into her tight body.

“Ainsley.” He leaned over and kissed another protest from her lips. “Ainsley, my dearest, I adore you. I can’t think of why we shouldn’t be doing this in a public area, I want you too much.”

Her arms wrapped around his shoulders. She cried against his neck and he flexed his hips, pumping into her soft, compliant body.

He could never love another woman the way he did her. Desmond kissed her well, he kissed her deeply and he kissed her with such reverence, it made their passion as special as any he could ever hope to share.

“Desmond.”

“Yes, I’ve got you.” He grabbed her one leg moving anxiously along his side.

“Oh Desmond, now, please now.”

Her insides tightened on his hardness. He kissed under her chin and along the damp column of her throat. She quivered with an appreciation for every place his lips touched—behind her ear, the top of her shoulder, the hollow at the base of her neck.

“Desmond,” she moaned.

Unstoppable tremors seized them both.

Ainsley’s knees squeezed his hips, her heels dug into the backs of his legs and she breathed with a desperate urgency.

“Desmond!” she cried out.

Desmond kissed her, groaning with his own release. He rolled over to his side and took Ainsley with him. Gathering her to him, he caressed her glistening body as she panted against his chest.

“I don’t think there’s anything more wonderful than this,” she sighed.

“You’re right and I think we should go home now.”

“I’d like that.” She laid her head on his arm.

He kissed her one more time, then helped her to her feet. They dressed in their wet clothes.

“This isn’t easy.” She looked back at him.

“Don’t worry, I’ll get you all trussed up. No one will ever know you were undressed.” He tied the laces of her gown.

“Do you think anyone might have spied us?” She looked at the scattering of shrubbery.

“I didn’t think about it one way or the other.”

She brushed over her clothes and walked to pick up the decanter while he dressed.

“Leave it,” he told her.

“You shouldn’t have brought it out here.” She stood looking at the river. “My father used to leave his glasses around for the servants to pick up.”

“I don’t usually drink, just lately I’ve been under a lot of stress.” He took the decanter and flung it into the river.

“I wish you would tell me what’s happening with you and the meetings you have.”

“I can’t give you the details you want. It would put your life at risk.”

Chapter Twenty-five

Ainsley took a deep breath. Guards advanced on them, with Lady Shelby at their side. The sight of Ainsley's nemesis seemed to come with an eerie foreboding.

"Desmond, what do you think she wants?"

"To get even."

"For what?" She turned to him.

"Listen to me, whatever they say, only part will be true. That letter I had contained vital information I was to pass on. In a way, you did me a favor by destroying it. I had to write the details down and I gave false ones. Everything I did was because of a trap I got caught in trying to help my father."

"And mine?"

He stared at her and pulled her to him.

"Yes, he was part of the plot to put Napoleon back into power, but your father died, and then mine. My grandfather coerced me into his schemes and I thought, by playing along, I'd have the advantage to stop what they were trying to do. I bungled every plan they made without them suspecting until this morning. Nellie read the note and recalled the details quite differently."

"I should think you would know it is treason to have this letter in your room." Nellie smirked and held up the tiny, folded note.

"Desmond." Ainsley looked at him. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right." He stroked a hand over her head.

Ainsley could kick herself for not destroying the note when she first found it. She should have taken the opportunity and lit a match to the thing instead of thinking for a minute it might help to keep it.

“Arrest her,” Nellie demanded.

“She’s not involved in this, Nellie, and you know it.” Desmond pulled Ainsley closer.

“But the guards found this in her room. It was hidden in her jewelry box.”

Ainsley stared at the note she had put away in what she thought was a safe place. “What were you doing in my—”

“I put the note there,” Desmond interrupted. “My wife didn’t know anything about it.”

“Desmond?” Ainsley grabbed his arm and tried to stop him.

He turned to the captain of the guards. “Lady Shelby, myself and others were in on the plans to help Napoleon back into power.”

“Take Lord Dunsmore and his wife,” the captain ordered his men. “Also Lady Shelby.”

“I’ve done nothing,” Nellie exclaimed. “I don’t know what Lord Dunsmore is talking about. Do you hear how he hopes to get his wife out of this, Captain? He wishes you to believe I was a part of all this conspiracy. I am no more a Bonapartist than you are.”

“Yet, you were the one to come to us with the information about the note in Lady Dunsmore’s possession,” the captain replied. “You will need to satisfy some questions with answers as to how you learned of the note.”

Ainsley wanted the same information, though it was all unimportant now.

“It’s over, Nellie,” Desmond told Lady Shelby. “If you confess, the court may have leniency.”

“Confess! I’ll do no such thing,” she shrieked and turned back to the captain. “Don’t you see how Lady Dunsmore is a conniving little whore

who tricked Lord Dunsmore into marrying her so she could move more freely amongst the traitors?”

Ainsley watched Lady Shelby backing from the guards closing in on her. It took two men to hold her and lead her away.

The guards came toward Ainsley and she gripped Desmond's wet sleeve. Fear outweighed shyness, but it also left her speechless and in shock.

* * *

The trip to London was uneventful. Desmond and Ainsley weren't allowed to speak to anyone or change their clothes and he couldn't blame the captain for making sure the threat of danger was removed from the Prince Regent's summer home.

Led into Newgate Prison, Desmond held Ainsley close to him. He was relieved they were kept together when taken to the tower cell, even though it wasn't right that she was there.

“In here.” The guard opened a door.

Desmond gripped Ainsley's hand tight as they went in. It was ironic that she was always meek, yet had the strength of an ant. She could lift ten times the number of burdens he carried and still think, while all he could do was gripe over the misfortune.

“At the trial, I want you to say you knew nothing.” He held her arms. “Promise you'll say whatever you need to save yourself.”

“I'll not lie.” She turned away.

“You'll not be lying. You didn't have anything to do with this situation. They cannot condemn you because of what you overheard or because of a piece of paper you found.”

“I should have done something, said something to stop you.”

“This has been going on a lot longer than either of us can imagine. There's more than just Napoleon's return. They plotted to seize power of England as well.”

“Seize power? What of the king and Prince George?”

“I did not allow myself to become privy to that information. However, I have the understanding they were to be murdered.”

“Oh dear.”

Desmond hugged her. “Ainsley, I’ll do or say anything to get you out of this. I’ll confess to everything as long as I know you’ll be spared.”

“I don’t think any of that is in our hands anymore, m’lord.” She paced the room and looked at the thick-planked door and the rusted iron bars. “I’ve heard of people getting out of here.”

“Yes, there have been escapes. Some are caught. Some are not. I daresay we do not hear much about the ones who manage to stay free. It would not do well to know Newgate Prison is escapable.”

“Still, you might think of a way.”

“Come sit down, Ainsley.”

They sat on the one cot. The stone wall was cold on his back. It kept him alert as his mind worked on figuring out a way to save his wife.

“We must find a way to escape.” Ainsley’s hand rested on his chest and she mindlessly stroked.

“It’s good of you to believe we can, my dear.” He tightened his arm around her and encouraged her to lie against him. “Rest now and I’ll think on it.”

Several hours passed before the heavy wood door clanged open and two guards came in with the jailer. Desmond was on his feet instantly and held Ainsley to his side.

“Lady Dunsmore, come with us.” The one officer took her arm to pull her free of Desmond.

“No!” She clung to Desmond. “We’ve not had enough time together.”

“Sorry, I don’t make the rules, m’lady. I just follow the orders.” He reached for her.

“No,” she begged. “No, please, I need more time.”

The guard grabbed her. “You ain’t getting me in trouble. Now come on.”

Desmond swung a fist and was shoved back by the other guard.

“Don’t hurt her. She’s done nothing wrong.” Desmond hung onto her fingers as long as he could, but the men wrenched Ainsley away.

“M’lord, please, for me. Don’t fight them.” She looked watery-eyed at him.

“I love you. Don’t ever forget that, Ainsley.”

She twisted and jerked her arm from the guard who didn’t hold as tight as he should have. Shoving her way past the other guard, she ran into Desmond’s arms. He hugged her tight, crushing her to him.

“Forgive me, Ainsley, for not telling you before now. I tried to protect you from what my grandfather was doing. I tried to find some way to keep you out of all of it. But I couldn’t. I needed your family name to get myself invited to the inner circles of the Prince Regent. I needed to gain the prince’s trust so I could prove that my grandfather and others conspired against the Crown. I went about it poorly and I see that now, when it will cost us both our lives.”

“Time to go, m’lady.” The guard took her arm. He gave a pitying look at Desmond and the tears on his face.

Before Desmond could think again, the door shut and closed him off from Ainsley. He rushed forward and shook the small barred opening. “I love you, Ainsley,” he shouted through the small gap. “I’ve loved you from the moment I saw you, don’t forget.” His strangled cry became inaudible as he slid down to the floor and put his face in his hands.

What had he done? She was going to be found guilty by association and then executed—hung for his bad judgment. His victory in stopping the traitors and saving two countries should have given him hope for a better future and yet it was because of him the woman he cherished would perish.

Desmond leaned his head back and prayed for a miracle to save Ainsley from death.

Ainsley held up her chin and went with the guards. She no longer had an urge to hide. Desmond had given her courage with his

declaration of love. He wasn't a traitor as she had feared, and she tried to have faith that when they stood before a tribunal, they'd be found, not guilty.

She tripped over her gown's drooping hem as she walked outside to a waiting coach. Reaching to pull herself up, she glanced at the tower. In all that had happened, she'd forgotten the one thing that she had delayed telling Desmond. When she heard him shout the words *I love you*, her heart soared.

"Wait, I'm not ready. I haven't told Desmond I love him. Oh God, how could I not have." She stared at the massive stone structure and hoped he had known what was in her soul.

"In you go." The guard gave her a push.

She sat and within minutes the coach bounced along the streets. When it stopped, she sat in a state of shock. The door opened and she couldn't move. Fear held her on the seat and kept her fingers tightly gripping the window.

She tried not to cry, but how could she stop the tears when she was frightened of dying and thankful to have heard her husband say he loved her. The one thing that surprised her was the turmoil of emotions hadn't made her sick to her stomach. Recalling happier moments with Desmond's handsome smile and his tenderness somehow gave her strength.

"Lady Dunsmore." The guard held the door open and offered his hand.

"Am I not to be tried?" Ainsley stared at the palace doors as she climbed from the coach.

She didn't know a thing about trials. Nonetheless, she was sure they were conducted somewhere else. The once-wet gown didn't look as elegant and she wished they had let her change her clothes, especially as servants stared. What must they think?

The richness of the entryway was still impressive. She took a quick look in the direction of the gold draperies she not so long ago hid behind. As they crossed the marble floor, she recalled how nervous she'd felt

before to be in the palace. It had no comparison to how frightened she was now.

Led past the ballroom, Ainsley remembered her dance with Desmond, his care for her when she got sick and the pride she experienced being his wife when he could have had any woman in the room.

When two sentries opened a set of doors, her attention returned to her situation. She didn't want to be there and no one was going to let her run and hide.

Her guard escorted her into what appeared to be the throne room and left her in the middle of the floor. She swallowed the dryness from her throat as she waited for the Prince Regent to speak. He sat on a chair in the center of a dais and appeared to be contemplating his choice of words.

After five minutes, he finally looked her in the eye and spoke. "Your brother-in-law has been very adept in his plea for your release, Lady Dunsmore. His information on your hasty marriage has proved to be a reliable reason for me to believe you were unaware of any conspiracy until recently. Therefore, I rescind all criminal charges and you are free to go."

"And my husband? Is Lord Dunsmore also to be released?"

The prince laughed and stood.

"It would seem these things I've come to learn of date back to include your father, his father and his grandfather. And there is the matter of your husband's confession."

"He did that for me. If you'd allow him to explain. Please, I beg that you forgive his knowledge. He was not in a place to do anything."

"Except tell me."

"You expressed to me your disappointment with the Rawlingtons just the other night. Lord Dunsmore was trying to do something to make you trust him. He married me hoping it would allow him to get closer to you."

"He has put your family into the middle of this. Your father has been accused and if he were not dead he would be soon."

"My father was a drunk and a stupid one at that. I do not admit this easily for I loved him dearly. However, I am no longer a naive child who sees only what is put before my eyes. I have listened and watched the people around me. Please have a heart and speak to my husband."

"Lord Dunsmore is a fool to have used you. He would have done well to have given you more of his attention than he has his schemes."

"Your Highness, I love my husband very much. It is a rare thing I know, but I believe he loves me as well. If you should not grant my request to spare his life, then don't save mine."

"Ainsley, no!" Harlan appeared from the corner of the room.

The prince put his hand up to silence him.

"Go on, Lady Dunsmore. Tell me why it is you think you should die. You've known the man for such a short time. Love can hardly be your only reason. Maybe you feel you can win more sympathy from me?"

"I don't do this to boast my position. I do this for myself. You don't know me, Your Highness. No one knows me for I've spent the last several years of my life hiding in rooms, behind doors, in closets and even behind draperies. I've run from all forms of attention and those who were not the closest of my family have been insulted, shamed and embarrassed by me when I struggled to be as unobtrusive as possible. Lord Dunsmore has given me courage by his kindness and his affection. I fear, without him, my heart would break into a million pieces, making it hard for me to ever come out of my room again. Do not ask me to be parted from him by letting me live if he cannot."

"Bring me Lord Dunsmore," the prince commanded. "Lord Harlan, would you escort Lady Dunsmore to the antechamber. I believe she needs a moment to refresh herself."

Ainsley curtsayed and went with Harlan. In the small room, Harlan hugged her. She dried her face on his handkerchief and paced with the greatest fear she had not said all the right things for the prince to grant her request.

“Calm down, Ainsley.” Harlan took her hands. “I don’t think there is a dress you own that isn’t wrinkled beyond redemption. And stop crying. You’ll not want Desmond to see you all red-eyed.”

Ainsley rushed to a mirrored wall. She smoothed over the gown, straightened the gathers across her bust and puffed up the small caps of her sleeves. Primping the loose ringlets of russet hair, her hands shook to get her curls in better order. She looked a mess from the river and when Desmond saw her again, she wanted him to be proud of her.

* * *

Desmond entered the throne room and gave a low bow. He didn’t understand his reason for being brought before the Prince Regent.

“I have pardoned your wife,” the prince declared.

“Ainsley’s not been executed?” Desmond breathed out a silent prayer of thanks.

“No, and she has requested your life be spared. Mind you, she did not beg. There is a difference, you know?” His rhetorical question went unanswered. “She’s a remarkable woman and for that, and because she is a cousin, I have decided to hear your plea.”

“Forgive me, Your Highness, but while I am truly grateful to you for sparing Lady Dunsmore, I cannot plead for myself.”

“You do not wish to ask me for your life?” He stood and placed his hands behind his back. “You wish no mercy?”

“No, Your Highness. While I have not yet been tried, it is but a formality. I withheld information from the Crown and for this I do apologize. But as silence is no excuse, I expect no leniency.”

“Lord Dunsmore, you surprise me. Lady Dunsmore swore you loved her, yet you do not beg to stay for her sake.”

“I am not worthy of the Lady Dunsmore’s affection. Ours was an arranged marriage, which I’m afraid was not even known to her until she

met me. Still, she did not balk at the notion and has been loyal to my family, even though it was against her better judgment.”

“Yes, loyalty. I understand you were loyal to your family, as well. Keeping all these secret meetings and such from the Crown.”

“I’ll not defend myself, Your Highness. All I am charged with, I will not deny.”

“Then I charge, you do not love your wife,” he bellowed.

“I’m sorry, Your Highness, maybe I misspoke. I will not deny anything brought against me regarding my silence about my grandfather and father. However, my personal feelings about my wife are not your concern.”

“Do you love her?” he demanded.

“Yes.”

“Does she love you?”

“I feel she does.”

“She has not told you?”

“I haven’t given her much opportunity to do so. I have been—” Desmond cleared his throat. “I have been a fool in more ways than one.”

“Then I suggest you find out. You may go.”

“Go?”

“Yes, you are pardoned. I like your wife’s steadfast conviction when she speaks about her feelings and you. It makes me believe the Lady Dunsmore to be a good judge of character and I am most pleased to have her as a member of my family. I do like to accommodate my cousins.” He clapped his hands together. “She asked that if you are not spared, she should not be, and I would have granted her request. Except I prefer to forgive your mistakes. Do not make it a habit, Lord Dunsmore.”

“You’re letting me go?”

“Lord Harlan presented evidence on behalf of you and your wife, Lord Dunsmore. If his documents weren’t persuasive, you’d not be standing before me.”

The prince stepped down from the dais, walked to Desmond and stood face to face with him.

“Lord Harlan has told me of the many times you’ve outwitted your associates. It must have been hard, given that the duke played a key role. Because of you, he’ll probably hang.”

“The only thing hard was not letting him find out how much I loathed him. There were many lies I had to tell and I’d do them again to serve England. My regret is letting the duke convince me to involve Lady Dunsmore even though because of these circumstances I have found the woman I want to spend my life with.”

“I don’t approve of your methods of service, Lord Dunsmore, but I commend you for your loyalty to the Crown.” The prince motioned to a guard. “I hope this ends your double life.”

“Yes, Your Highness. I can assure you, my only interest is living a quieter life and doing everything to make my wife happy.”

“Good, now your lady is eager to tell you her feelings on the very same matter.” The prince waved his hand and Desmond glanced back at Ainsley.

A smile brighter than a thousand diamonds beamed from her pretty face.

“Your Highness.” Desmond bowed and backed only a few paces before turning and running to meet Ainsley. He swung her around and kissed into her hair, her face and her mouth. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, Desmond.” She held onto him. “I love the way you hold me when I’m nervous. I love the way you touch me when we’re in bed. I love you so much I would hide beneath a rock for the rest of my life if I didn’t have you.”

Desmond pulled her tighter. “You’ll always have me, my love.”

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A Desperate Longing

She's a princess desperate for a husband. He's a duke...or is he?

A Beautiful Surrender

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With her uncle poised to steal her kingdom, Princess Katerina must marry. Miraculously, a new handsome duke appears on the scene. His sexy charm makes her tingle from head to toe. But can she overlook his arrogance?

The future of Dax's country is at stake. Forced to masquerade as a duke to seduce Katerina and prevent her from marrying, he courts the princess with great success. But when someone tries to kill Katerina, his instincts are to protect the passionate lady no matter the cost.

With Dax's deception revealed and her life at risk, can Katerina still surrender her heart?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *A Beautiful Surrender*:

Dax hadn't expected the princess to be beautiful. He knew nothing of Katerina when he came to Alluvia and beyond her appearance, she had an inner quality he found appealing—loneliness. He identified it well from experience. She wanted someone to cherish her for herself and not for her position or wealth. That awareness made him feel off balance dealing with her, because he wanted the very same for himself.

"Was your journey here uneventful, Your Grace?" the princess asked, not responding to his bid for a more personal acquaintance.

"Won't you even try to call me Dax?" He slipped his arm around her back and drew her against him as if they were going to dance on the sidelines of the ballroom.

"I'm sorry, Your Grace, but it would not be proper for me to address you so informally, nor is it appropriate for you to hold me this close."

He waltzed her along slower than everyone else danced, steering her farther from the view of her brother.

“Proper and appropriate are what you make of it, Princess. You appear capable of deciding for yourself what is suitable.” He gave in to decorum and danced her into the crowd on the ballroom floor. “Unless you’re...never mind.”

The princess’s soft brown eyes looked up at him with greater interest than he expected. All his information about Princess Katerina of Alluvia had, of course, been tainted by the source. She could hardly be considered a shrew or cold-hearted. Not when she gazed at him with the lustful passion of a woman willing to compromise her reputation. She spoke of them being too close, but not once did she try to remove herself from his embrace.

“Or what?” Her sweet breath fanned his face.

“Or, Your Highness, might I suggest you are uncomfortable in a man’s arms?” he teased.

“I’ve danced in the arms of many men and I see no threat to be in yours.”

“And your heart?” He pressed his hand to her back, forcing her to feel the pounding of his heart upon her breasts and discovering hers rapidly beating, too.

“What does my heart have to do with dancing?” Her eyes grew curious with a delightful sparkle, as if she were an innocent child.

“Does it always beat this fast and hard, as if trapped in a cage?”

The princess shook her head violently in several short turns. Two curls sprung free and bobbed over her left eye. Her silent protest spoke the opposite of what she wanted him to think and know about her.

Dax put a hand up and tucked the curls back into the arranged swirls. He didn’t tell her how soft and silky the strands were—his attraction grew strong, like she possessed the magic to put him under a spell. He enjoyed the sensation of happiness, but now was not the right time to forget he worked toward destroying her to save his kingdom.

Wherever they went, the sea of people parted like two waves. Dax and Katerina moved carelessly between the wakes. The brightly lit room concealed nothing about the woman. She carried herself as regally as any noble. Her willowy figure intrigued him enough that he overstepped boundaries, sliding his hands wherever he pleased.

On the small of her back, he felt the heat of her body. Endowed with a healthy set of breasts on her sleek, streamlined frame, the way the princess had them cinched up in her clothing appeared to be uncomfortable. Taking note of the soft ivory swells made his cock stiff and his erection battle the cloth.

"Might I suggest some refreshments?" Dax didn't wait for her answer. He needed a drink and a reprieve from her delicious, warm body rubbing his.

From a servant passing by, he plucked two long-stemmed crystal flutes from a tray. Handing one to the princess, he took a swig from the other. Over the rim of the glass, he watched Katerina's mouth part. The fine crystal touched her dusky bottom lip and she tipped the glass, gingerly sipping the wine. Her tongue peeked out and ran a slow trail over her top lip. The elegant drama enchanting him didn't end when she took another sip and the bubbles tickled her nose. She lifted a hand immediately to ward off a sneeze she didn't get to stop.

Dax put a hand to hers, holding the glass to prevent her from spilling the drink. He looked deep into her wonderful stare. A hundred places to kiss her and he thought of nowhere else than the tip of her nose. At the first chance he got, he would.

The princess shivered.

"Are you cold?" He continued holding her hand on the glass stem.

"Actually, I'm quite hot."

Her warm, wine-flavored breath caught his and tugged encouragingly at his lips. With little effort on his part, he could have her against him. From toes to nose, he wanted to meld their flesh with the thrill of passion.

“That doesn’t seem hard to imagine with all the people in this room generating body heat.” He envisioned his tongue thrusting between her slightly parted, plum-tinted lips, tasting the wine the way she had.

Dax discarded his fluted crystal on the credenza next to him. Then, right as her eyes blinked, he put a hand on her hip and one between her shoulder blades. The princess slid her foot closer. Her thigh brushed his and her breasts pressed against his chest. The pearlescent skin rose above the edge of her violet gown. He recognized her perfume as an infusion of rose petal water—a scent he never appreciated until now. Something else had been added. After another deep inhale, he suspected it was the natural fragrance of her sex.

Katerina’s hips shifted and he moved his leg, accommodating her fit and sensing a preclimactic tension. He forced his knee against her gown, into the juncture of her thighs. She took a deeper breath. Her glassy gaze held a blend of trepidation and confusion. His stance blocked her from public view. Though not enough to prevent a passerby from seeing their closeness—tightening, aligning and fitting together as only lovers should.

The tragedy of Katerina letting the duke kiss her would be, she’d love it. She’d adore the moment, the man and the sensations of being a woman. Then he’d abandon her. She didn’t know much about men, even with her brother’s antics giving her insight as to what they were like. He showed sweet devotion to one and then another without ever realizing the consequences to the woman.

Katerina looked into the devil’s blue eyes. Each time his fingers moved, she repositioned. Every time his body twisted, she turned to fit. The pores in her skin dampened and she shivered again. Expectation and desire held her back from the boldness of begging him to kiss her.

“We’re too close.”

“I know.” He had his hands in all the wrong places for public appearance.

“You should move away.”

“Or you could.”

She looked at his naturally tanned skin and the hint of whiskers peppering his jaw. His eyebrows were combed flat and his teeth resembled polished chips of white marble. Only someone so near might notice the hair in his nose was clipped. Yet, she didn't want anyone else to be as she was, where his lips might touch hers or their lashes fold together. Fantasies rose high in her mind. For once she didn't force them away.

The duke's hand squeezed her bottom and she heard an embarrassing moan escape her throat. As if testing her voice, he kneaded the quivering cheek of her ass again, pulling and forcing her tighter into his crotch.

His other hand slipped up her back. Scorching fingers folded around the nape of her neck and held her head firmly. She couldn't begin to think where she should put her hands.

"If I don't move, what will you do?" Her body went through a series of titillating sensations in response to the heat between them.

Storms erupt when a merman's treasure is stolen from him.

The Ocean's Shadow

© 2007 Jennah Sharpe

A dark, shadowy creature haunts the waters of Copperberry's rugged coast. Feared by the villagers, he incites lust in the lonely women of the town.

A servant, escaped from abusive employers, Claire never expected to live through the storm she threw herself into. Rescued by a mysterious man, she begins a new life, until a bounty is placed on her head.

But an angry merman in exile is a dangerous creature...especially when the one woman who can return his lost emotions is taken from him.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *The Ocean's Shadow*:

He was right. He couldn't stay away. Not after he'd seen her lying in bed, peaceful and vulnerable. He'd kept himself too long from touching her as they'd lain together the night before. When she entered the cottage and looked at him, without startling, he felt weak. It was as if she expected him to be there. Her acceptance swept him off guard, but her sultry smile had him leaping across the room to hold her in his arms. That's exactly what he did and she let him. She was doing something to him on the inside for which there was no defense. It didn't matter she was a human. He wanted her. His body ached with need.

She melted against his skin, showing no sign of hesitation, holding tight to his shoulders. Her lips were sweet and so willing. The soft little moan that escaped on a breath gave him the courage he needed. Her lips parted just a little, enough to let his tongue inside. He luxuriated in the feel of her tongue sliding against his. Unbelievable that she wanted him as much as he needed her. It had him rock hard and throbbing.

He swept her up off the floor and carried her to the bed. As he set her down, she clung to his neck, forcing him down on top of her in an awkward fall. Quickly, he shifted his weight to his elbows, all too aware of how small and petite she was in comparison to his formidable form. She kicked her skirts away and wrapped her legs around his lean hips; all the while he took from her mouth the taste that had been calling to him throughout the day.

She was sweeter than the sea plums he adored. Sweeter than the wines brought to him by hopeful women. Sweeter than any of those widows he'd tasted. And those legs...they were stronger than they looked. She'd hooked her ankles and squeezed him closer. He released her mouth and gasped as he felt warm heat emanating from between her legs. Hot moisture slicked against his abdomen. *Of course*. He hadn't provided her with any undergarments. She was bare beneath the light dress he'd found for her. *By the gods*, he was done for.

When he looked into her beautiful green eyes, he realized she knew exactly what he was thinking. Mischief glowed like a little spark in her irises, swirls of desire flared out around them. She was all but daring him to take her. It was a surprise to him to have a woman not fearful, not full of guilt in some way.

"Tell me what you want, bright eyes. What do you dream of?" he whispered against her smooth, white throat.

"I want what you give the others. I want to know why the women treasure you so."

His quiet laughter filled the cottage. "They treasure me because I can give them what no *man* can. They would not come to me if their needs were met elsewhere."

"So, they use you?" Her breath was coming in short pants now as his hand gently caressed her side, her arm and the round outer curve of her petite breasts.

"No, I use *them*."

She grinned, "Well, as long as both sides are happy...are you using me, Ailfinn?"

“Would it bother you if I were?” He did nothing to disguise the need in his voice.

Claire didn't answer. Ailfinn took advantage of the silence and delved into her mouth yet again. Then, raising himself on one elbow, he slipped the dress down over her shoulders, kissing every inch of skin, as it was uncovered. She kicked at the skirt with her legs until it fell gracelessly to the floorboards.

*Being a spinster was much easier than becoming the accidental countess
and it definitely didn't prepare her for falling in love.*

The Accidental Countess

© 2007 Melissa Schroeder

Colleen MacGregor doesn't like rich men, especially rich titled men. Still, her guilt won't allow her to leave Sebastian passed out in the snow. Before he can leave, they are caught in a compromising situation. Under an agreement he will leave and never bother her again, Colleen marries a man she barely knows to save her reputation. Before she can really stop anything, she is whisked to London, where she is transformed into an Original and captures the attention of the ton—not to mention her husband.

Sebastian Ware thinks he'll never see the sharp-tongued spinster again. He never planned on becoming the next Earl of Penwyth...or on falling in love. But before he can declare his feelings, he must protect her from an enemy who wants them both dead. Racing against the clock, Sebastian strives to save them both so he can turn their accidental love into a love for eternity.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *The Accidental Countess*:

Sebastian closed his eyes. Every soft, wonderful curve Colleen possessed was plastered against him. Nothing in his life had felt quite so wonderful. He opened his eyes, reveling in the dark fire of her hair spread across the pristine white sheets.

So much hair. So many ideas.

He braced himself on his elbows on the bed, relieving her of his weight. Colleen was not a small woman, but she definitely was a woman. His hardened arousal was a testament. It took every bit of his willpower not to press his groin against her. From her wide-eyed expression, he would upset Colleen if he did that.

She swallowed and then licked her lips. The thought of kissing her lips, of tasting her there, of tasting her everywhere, sent most of his blood to his loins. He groaned, and her eyes grew larger, as if she were afraid of being ravished. Because, of course, she should be afraid. At the moment, his brain had stopped functioning. The only thing he could think about was sinking into her warmth and being lost.

“Sebastian?” A tremor of fear threaded her voice.

“Colleen, I’m not going to hurt you.”

Even in the dim light, he could see the disbelief in her eyes. Her distrust, her wariness of men, was something he would have to overcome. *Patience.*

“All I want is a kiss, love.”

Her lips parted, and he watched, fascinated by the pulse in her throat as her neck and face flushed. Ah, not that immune to him, was she?

His control threatened to crumble as the moist heat of her sex warmed him through their clothing. Good God, he hadn’t even started, and she was responding. What did she hide under those prim clothes and pinched looks?

Unable to wait, to hold back any longer, he bent his head and took her lips. Not completely. Instead, he placed small kisses, just missing her mouth, a whisper of a caress guaranteed to drive them both mad.

He did not close his eyes. Rather, he left them open, staring into hers, which were luminous behind her spectacles, as he teased her mouth with his half kisses. Her breathing deepened, and a moment later her eyes slid closed.

Triumph pumped through him. He skimmed his hands up to cup her face. Her skin was so soft, so delicate. No longer able to restrain himself, he took complete possession of her mouth. She opened instantly to his questing tongue, and the taste of her exploded across his senses. Warm power flooded his body and he was lost to the moment.

Never in his life had a kiss been quite so erotic. Colleen’s hands no longer lay limply by her side but tangled in his hair, her fingers digging into his scalp. He was fully on top of her, breast to chest, belly to belly,

his hard member pressing against her soft core. He locked his jaw, trying to reign in his control and not embarrass himself for the first time since the age of sixteen.

He moved his hips, closing his eyes, reveling in the feel of her against him. She stilled and tried to pull her head away from him. But Sebastian held tight and kissed her while he continued moving. A second or two later, she softened and returned his kisses again.

The musky scent of her arousal filled the room, furthering his own. Nothing else mattered. The way they met and married, not to mention his distrust of women, all faded into the background. The need to make this woman his—his lover, his mate, his wife—surged within him, pounded in his heart and soul.

He shifted his weight and palmed her breast through the thin fabric of her wrapper and nightclothes. A few light touches and her nipple pebbled. He groaned. How had this woman hidden all this passion beneath her fussy exterior? He desired her now, wanted to take her as was his due as her husband, but knew he needed to proceed slowly. He pulled away, closed his eyes and took a ragged breath.

“Sebastian?” she asked, her voice breathless and worried.

He looked down at her. His heart stopped for a beat then slammed hard against his rib cage. Her glorious hair lay in disarray, her glasses fogged and her lips full and rosy from his kisses.

She shifted her lower body, unintentionally he was sure, causing her sex to press harder against him. The woman was going to kill him. He closed his eyes and shuddered.

“Sebastian?” Now her voice held a note of hurt. Every muscle in her body stiffened. “Don’t worry. I understand. If you would just get up.” The primness was back in her tone, and a hint of resignation colored it. Almost every ounce of his seductress had disappeared.

Before answering, he moved to cover her fully again. “Colleen, what is it you understand?”

The silvery depths of her eyes darkened. “I understand that our marriage is to be one of convenience.”

“Convenience?” he muttered.

Through his irritation, her underlying tone reached him. He held his usually sharp tongue as he analyzed what lay behind the comment. Did he detect a note of disappointment? Was she regretting their marriage or her misassumption that it would be sexless? And with her response, she did desire him.

“Colleen, I have told you before, and I will tell you again, there is nothing convenient about our marriage.”

Her eyes, already huge behind her spectacles, widened. Fire ignited in them, but not the kind he wanted.

Before she could open her mouth to argue, he swooped in for another kiss, moving against her. His blood shot to molten lava as she returned the kiss, shyly tangling her tongue with his.

He pulled back, both of them breathless. “I told you I never wanted another marriage, but I plan on claiming you as my wife, my *true* wife.”

“But you don’t—”

He flexed his hips again, stopping her protest. Her eyes fluttered closed. She sank her teeth into her bottom lip and hummed. The sound licked across his senses, bolstering his already runaway arousal.

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