

SIREN PUBLISHING

Emma Wildes

Arabian Pearl

Brothers of the Absinthe Club

Brothers of the Absinthe Club 1

Arabian Pearl

The guest of a foreign prince, Robert St. Claire is given a beautiful slave for his pleasure. Unusual customs aside, he finds himself in a terrible dilemma. Not only is she English, but the daughter of a friend. In order to rescue her from captivity, he must use her like a harem girl in every way possible...

Lady Celia Davenport has been abducted, sold into slavery, and now finds herself in the bed of an Infidel lord. If she gives him erotic pleasure with subservient eagerness, there is a glimmer of hope in her future. Anxious to escape, she finds that perhaps sexual servitude isn't the prison she once imagined. Besides, every time she gives her lover satisfaction, she receives a rare and valuable pearl as a reward.

An English lord and a lovely slave find that circumstance and fate have a hand in granting those rare Arabian Pearls...

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Emma Wildes

EROTICA ROMANCE



Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com

A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

ARABIAN PEARL

Copyright © 2007 by Emma Wildes

ISBN: 1-933563-12-5

First Printing 2007

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

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Printed in the U.S.A.

PUBLISHER

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Prologue

London, 1817

“It is an intriguing idea, is it not?” Jonas Maxim carefully poured water over the slotted spoon and watched the cube of sugar dissolve. The greenish liquid in his glass slowly clouded.

The private room in one of London’s most exclusive clubs was dead quiet after his outrageous suggestion.

“Revealing our most daring sexual exploits?” His brother, Colin, who sprawled comfortably in a leather chair with his long legs extended, finally responded with a low laugh. “Only you would come up with such an idea. Actually, though, I’m all for it.”

“We’re all old friends,” Jonas pointed out with practicality. “Since we gather here each month to share each other’s company and a few drinks, I thought it might be an interesting diversion.”

Gavin St. John, blond and slim, raised his fair brows. “We’re also men, so I suppose all of us enjoy a good tale about one of our favorite subjects, which means sex. I think the notion has merit.”

With a lift of his glass, Ross Benson, Viscount Winterton, said dryly, “I think you all know I’m in. I have a story in mind already when it is my turn.”

The Duke of Bellingham looked predictably amused. His younger brother, Christian, also grinned. Seated at the table, his glass resting idly in his long fingers, the Earl of Grayson had a small, quixotic smile on his lips. “I agree also. In fact, if the rest of you wouldn’t mind, I would like to go first. I think I have an account that will hold your interest.”

Jonas leaned back in his chair. “I believe we are all ears.”

Chapter 1

The greeting room was grand. The faint, exotic scent of tobacco and foreign spices drifted in the air. Robert St. Claire inhaled slowly and strived to look completely relaxed and at ease, though the situation had him slightly off-balance.

It wasn't that he was unused to the formality and opulence of the palace. He just wasn't sure what had summoned him to this particular meeting. Politics were convoluted between two such different countries, and heaven knew he didn't want to wade deep into something and cause damage. He was a guest, not an ambassador for England.

"My Lord Grayson."

The man before him bowed, and he rose to mimic the polite gesture.

"I apologize," said Abdul, Consul to the Sultan, "for my tardiness. Please sit."

"You wish to see me about some sort of treaty between our countries, Minister?" Robert said in cautious inquiry, sinking back down. "I'm afraid I am not a diplomat, and therefore not authorized to speak for my government in any way."

The other man smiled. He was thin, dark-haired, and surprisingly not dressed in the typical garments of his native land but instead attired much like Robert himself. His tailored European clothes were no doubt designed, at a guess, to make him seem less foreign and promote good relations. Abdul shook his head slightly. "I used that excuse to gain a private audience with you. Forgive

me, please. You are a friend of my master's son, but you are also English. That is why I wished to see you."

Still mystified, Robert had to wonder why the man who dealt with the diplomatic affairs of the powerful sultan would want to see him. "I see. Why the subterfuge, if I may ask?"

Abdul spoke slowly, dark eyes direct. "You met Ali at Cambridge. There, the two of you, so different yet apparently intellectually compatible, formed a vast friendship, yes? You are of the same age, both from elevated bloodlines. His family is more exalted but your country more powerful. In short, my lord, you are both princes, titled and wealthy. The Sultan holds you in esteem because his son considers an Infidel in such high regard."

Abdul's dark brown eyes looked at him speculatively. In response to those observations, Robert said moderately, "Ali was having a little trouble with the concept of cricket, and he isn't one to accept defeat because of ignorance. I helped a little with his batting and bowling. I suppose we both recognized a mutual competitive nature, the color of our skins aside. And so a friendship was born between us, yes."

The minister folded his hands in his lap. "And he invited you here."

"It took me several years to make it, but, I am honored to be a guest."

"Perhaps the timing was dealt at the hand of Allah himself."

Robert lifted his brows in obvious question, reaching for his cup. He found the sweet hot coffee a little cloying, but then again, he was somewhere completely different than the rolling green hills of his native England.

"My master wishes to give you a gift," Abdul said abruptly. "A woman to fill your nights with pleasure while staying with us. She was recently bought, destined for his harem, but I'm afraid I took another liberty and may have suggested that you have a particular weakness for the pale, blond women of your native country."

Robert straightened a little, his booted feet moving against the lush pile of the brightly patterned rug under his feet. "There's an Englishwoman here?"

The other man nodded. His cup of coffee sat untouched on the delicately inlaid table between them. "We had no part in her capture, understand that. There are predators all along this coast, men who take prisoners and sell them, especially beautiful women. When they bring them here, if they are desirable and pure, my master will buy them if they please him." Abdul smiled briefly. "You think it barbaric, your face tells me so, but it is not so much different than the way your society sells their young daughters into arranged marriages for dowries and settlements."

A little different, Robert argued silently, schooling his face to a mild expression, but perhaps not as wide a gap as one would think when put that way. He commented, "I am not here to judge your customs, Minister. Do you wish me to speak to Ali, see if he can ask his father to free the girl?"

"Absolutely not." The response was curt, emphatic. "I have already spoken to his Highness, telling him that the female claims to be high-born, that her family has influence and money and will want her freed, even if it means English war ships arriving our harbor. The English consul here has spies and eventually they will know she is sequestered in the palace, so it is only a matter of time."

"Who is she?"

"She claims she is the daughter of the Duke of Rushton."

Robert digested that information with some dismay. Good God. The duke's young daughter, he recalled, was reputed to be the beautiful belle of London society. He'd never met her, since she was an ingénue debutante and he traveled so widely lately, but her name had appeared in the society section of the papers his mother regularly sent him. How on earth, he wondered, did she fall into

the hands of roving criminals in search of illicit females to sell on the market as sex slaves in this remote part of the world?

"I know her father," Robert said. "She could be right. He has a great deal of influence in my country and is also very rich. Perhaps you should ransom her. He would pay to regain his child."

"Unfortunately, my lord does not need his money. Neither does he understand that a woman could be held in such value that a country might wage war to gain her independence." Abdul added patiently, "It is not our way. Women are property, do you understand? My lord is not cruel, and Ali is a fair man basically, but neither would bow to your request for freeing a mere woman. To them both, she is insignificant."

"Yes," Robert replied, the implications of the conversation coming clear. "I studied your customs thoroughly before coming here."

"I am a little different...my mother was of your race. The Sultan dismissed the threat of possible retaliation, but I am not so sure." Abdul hesitated, toying with the handle of his cup. "I suggested her as the gift he wished to give you. This is something he would understand. My declaration that you would prefer a woman of your own race in your bed made sense to him."

Never having been given a human being before, Robert was hard pressed to comment.

Abdul went on doggedly, "After generations of authority, he does not believe anyone can threaten his power, but I know better—there are countries out there, including your own—that could cause great damage and best us in war."

Considering that the British navy was the finest on earth, Robert simply inclined his head. "I see why you wished to tell me this. I will accept his bequest and make arrangements for her to return to England at once."

"No, it is not that simple. She is a gift, an homage." Abdul's expression was stern and grave. "That is why I invented a reason to

talk to you face to face, so you would not make a blunder in this matter. Honor the gift in the way in it is given. It is a manner of pride for the Sultan that you enjoy her during your stay here. When you leave in two weeks, she can perhaps go with you if she pleases you well. It is the only chance of her freedom.”

“Enjoy...her?” Robert weighed the implications of that statement.

The minister nodded vehemently. “She is given to pleasure you sexually, it does not matter who she says she is. Now that she is here, she is merely another lovely face and warm body. If she does not please you, he will replace her with someone else, another girl, maybe one more willing. I am told she is not taking to her captivity and has already been cruelly punished once. It will go the worse with the duke’s daughter if she does not submit. Once relegated to the harem, she will be lost, beyond your help, or mine.”

Just by the force of sheer will did Robert stop himself from saying bluntly that it was not just barbaric but incomprehensible, shoving half the population into a category little better treated than animals. However, criticizing a way of life as old as civilization itself wouldn’t help this young woman that had suddenly become his problem.

Leaning forward persuasively, Abdul said, “Help her. It is two weeks in your bed, compared to a lifetime of sexual subservience. She is beautiful, with hair the color of a glorious golden sunrise—she will please you. And please you, she must. I can not stress this enough. This will sound unorthodox to you, but someone will be secretly watching each night as you bed her, judging your enjoyment, and her compliance. The Sultan insists his honored guest have the finest treatment, right down to how she services your male needs. It would be a grave insult were he to give you a woman who did not seem both eager and obedient. You must tell her to not resist, and at the end of your visit, if Allah is on your

side, you can both go back to England.” Abdul rose and bowed again. “I trust your honor will keep this conversation between us.”

* * * *

The woman called Lela glided silently across the gleaming tile of the apartment like some sort of predatory bird, her silken garments set off by the drapery of pearls around her neck. The long gleaming strands caught the dying light coming through the high, unreachable windows above.

Slave quarters, Celia Davenport thought resentfully. Though the room was luxurious—a pallet piled with silken pillows, a carved elaborate chest, and the gleaming floors—it was still a prison, the window openings so high above the ground that she could barely see more than the muted sunlight that illuminated the space.

“Stand,” Lela commanded, reaching out one hand.

Celia obeyed, rising out of the bathwater, the memory all too vivid of the repercussions of her last defiance. She had been chained to a bed with no food or water for two days, her bladder full to bursting, her mind beginning to wander in delirium before she was set free. Lela took a towel and dried her naked body as Celia stood quiet and docile, not even blinking when the towel rubbed over her exposed breasts and between her legs. Taking a brush, the woman began to run it through her damp hair, tugging it gently through the waist-length curls.

She had been...violated. Not raped, she was sure that came later, when the Sultan called her to his bed, but her body had been touched, invaded, shaved, perfumed, and generally treated as if she was an object, not a person.

“You are so very lovely, yet the angry look in your eyes is objectionable,” Lela said in soft warning. “You must please your

master this night, not anger him with your willful ways. A woman is made to pleasure, to be a vessel for a man's seed."

Three days ago, Celia would have made a haughty retort. Now, she merely bit her lips to keep silent, drawing blood.

"You have been given the very great honor of being sent to a man the Sultan admires. You will shame him if you fail, and the consequences of that failure will not be pleasant. Do not doubt me on this."

Despite herself, Celia swallowed hard. *Not the Sultan himself*...well, that was something at least. During their one brief meeting, when he had ordered her clothes removed and perused her body with the look of a man choosing a bit of livestock or admiring a painting, she had seen he was old, at least seventy, and fat.

This man, the one he admired, might not be any better, she reminded herself grimly. Her stomach lurched at the thought of having to endure the touch of someone she didn't even know, much less pretend to enjoy it. "Who is he?"

"It is not your place to ask." After she slipped a silk robe over her shoulders, Lela offered her a cup. "Drink this. It will make you more receptive to his needs. When he takes his pleasure, you must be willing and ready to do everything he asks of you."

She didn't want to be receptive. Celia wanted to waken from this living nightmare. What kind of place accepted a subservient system of holding women for the pleasure of men, and considered it acceptable and even normal? Unwilling women, she thought sharply, wondering how many of the girls in the harem actually wished to be there.

Lela shrewdly read her expression and once again proffered the cup. "Do you not wish to enjoy this night as much as possible? This will help, pretty one."

Celia reached out and took the silver cup offered to her. The liquid inside was warm, like a honeyed wine, and she sipped, a certain fatalistic resignation settling into her very bones.

She was a captive. She was about to be given to a complete stranger who would use her body callously and think of her as nothing but a convenient receptacle, a way to vent his lust.

“Drink it all,” Lela urged, her face lovely despite the lines of age, her forceful presence not exactly cruel. Celia had learned her captors were ruthlessly rigid, the set of rules not ever to be violated, but if she cooperated, she was treated well enough. Lela seemed to be a sort of administrator of the harem, the one who taught obedience, who regulated which women would be set aside for the perusal of the Sultan. She also spoke English, which was why Celia suspected she tended to her herself.

When Celia had finished the beverage, Lela took her hand. “Come, it is time.”

She allowed herself to be led, clad in nothing but the silken cloth that wrapped in sheer layers around her shoulders and fell to her ankles, through the maze of hallways into a part of the vast palace she had never seen. There were guards at intervals and they kept their eyes forward, but she was certain she could feel them staring at her once she had passed. When they paused at a door, Lela knocked lightly, pushing it open when a male voice bid entrance. She whispered one last warning with unmistakable authority, “Remember everything I have told you, see to his needs, and you will be rewarded, my pretty one.”

Oh God, thought Celia, her knees weakening, her heart pounding.

If she didn’t do this, didn’t submit meekly, she would be punished in a manner that made her earlier confinement seem sublime. Somehow, she just couldn’t believe that her life would be regulated to this insanity.

Pushing her inside, Lela followed, bowing. “My lord, she is here.”

Chapter 2

The duke's daughter was draped in clinging cloth, her eyes downcast as much as any harem offering as she entered his sleeping chambers.

Robert turned, seeing an older woman, dark-haired and dressed in flowing robes, grip his offering in one hand. She urged her forward, her other hand going to efficiently strip away the concealing cloth in one swift movement, leaving her charge nude. "See," the woman cooed, "what my master has sent you as a token of his friendship? Is she not gloriously beautiful?"

She was, that wasn't an argument. Long silken curls tumbled over her bare shoulders, her skin enticingly smooth and flawless, and her voluptuous breasts were firm and tipped with pink nipples. Any hair had been removed from her body, so the apex at her thighs gleamed pale, the open exposure of her sex something new and intriguing. She was slender except for the weight of her full breasts and that extravagant fall of lovely gold hair. He couldn't see the color of her eyes, concealed as they were by lush lashes and half-closed eyelids.

Heaven help him, he thought, he actually wanted no part of this, but his body was already reacting. His cock had begun to stiffen, almost against his will.

"She is lovely," he agreed in a murmur, meaning it.

He saw the girl's head come up slightly at the recognition of his familiar accent. It wasn't surprising that she hadn't known at once he was English. He wore a loose silk black robe and his hair was dark, his skin tanned from his recent African travels.

The woman called Lela also noticed the girl's small reaction and frowned in disapproval. "She will please you," she said firmly. "She has never known a man, yet I ruptured her virgin's barrier two days ago with an instrument designed for that purpose, my lord, in anticipation of this night. No pain should disrupt your enjoyment of her."

He tried to picture this gently-reared, privileged young woman enduring the procedure that rendered her technically no longer a virgin so she would not disrupt his carnal needs, and felt vaguely guilty just for *being* male. "I am sure she will be very enjoyable," he said evenly, not certain how to deal with a young and uncertain maiden facing her very first sexual encounter. There was also the fact that if she in any way acted as if she didn't wish to please him, or tried to resist, she would be punished.

And lost, Abdul had said, inside the forbidden confines of a harem.

Hell, Robert thought darkly.

"Go to the bed and lie down," the woman ordered.

For a second, the girl hesitated and her shoulders stiffened as if she might refuse, but she obediently walked a few paces to where the huge bed sat on a dais, the coverings rich and soft, pillows piled high in one corner. Climbing up the marble steps, she laid down in the middle.

His erection swelled at the significance of that suppliant pose, rising against the silk of the robe he wore. With an inward curse, he tried to stem his body's unruly response. The girl lay very still, her bare breasts quivering slightly, the flesh ripe and opulent with those entrancing pink crests.

As she took a small jar from the pocket of her dress, Lela explained in her soft accented English, "She might still be tender, my lord, and her passage is very tight. This cream will ease your entry and it increases your pleasure, as well." She approached the bed and ordered briskly, "Open for me."

Again he caught it—the flash of defiance that came and went before the girl slowly spread her legs apart. As he watched, the woman opened the jar and dipped her fingers into the substance inside, reaching between the girl's legs and parting her labia to insert her finger inside her vaginal passage, her hand moving as she spread it. More of the lotion was applied before the older woman removed her hand and recapped the jar. The only reaction he could see to the impersonal invasion of her body was that two spots of color had appeared on the girl's smooth cheeks.

"I am leaving you now. I will come for her in the morning." With that Lela moved in graceful silence across the room and slipped out the door, closing it behind her.

They will be watching as you bed her... Abdul's warning rang in his head. If he spared Rushton's young daughter, she was doomed. Neither could he simply sit down and explain the situation either. He'd found the small slits in the wall by the bed, cleverly worked into a mosaic relief, and not only would whoever sat there and covertly watched see them clearly, they could also hear anything that was said, he was sure. It would be an insult to his host if he explained to her he was only doing this because he was forced by her circumstances.

The situation was untenable, but there seemed little choice.

Was it rape, he wondered, if both parties are unwilling to perform the act?

Well, not precisely unwilling, he reminded himself wryly. He was almost fully hard, and as he approached the bed, he felt himself stiffen further. The beautiful nude woman waiting there was not a sight any man could ignore. She watched him, her lashes still lowered, and he could see the slight rapid beat of her pulse in her throat.

He smiled at her as he sat down on the edge of the bed and reached down to touch her cheek. "What's your name?"

"Celia." The answer was hushed almost inaudible.

Yes, that was it, he remembered now. Lady Celia Davenport. “You are lovely, Celia,” he told her, his fingers lightly tracing the full curve of her lower lip. Her mouth was pink and perfect and he urged her to a sitting position facing him, her long hair trailing over her slim shoulders. “I won’t hurt you,” he promised, leaning closer, brushing his mouth across hers.

Her eyes, azure blue at this close range, simply watched him. He kissed her again, a light pressure, tasting her.

“Tell me, where are you from?” he asked for their unwanted audience.

The slight shake of her head told him that she had obviously been instructed to keep silent about her background. “I see,” he murmured, not touching her in anyway except for the drift of his mouth across her jaw. “Can you speak with me at all?”

“If you ask me a question, my lord, I will answer it if I am allowed.”

Inhaling her delicate fragrance, Robert slipped his arm around her waist and brought her closer, into his embrace. Her breasts pressed against his partially open robe and he could feel the warmth of her smooth, pliant skin. Whispering in her ear, hoping it looked as if he was continuing his gentle wooing and trying to ease her fears, he said, “Do not react in any way to what I am about to say, please, but I know your father. I hope only you can hear me say this.”

To her credit, she showed no outward sign of a reaction, but he felt it. Her heartbeat increased and her breathing changed slightly. He moved his mouth to her neck, pressing against that quickened pulse, before sliding upward again. With delicate care, he nibbled on her earlobe, the movement of his lips concealed by her silken hair. “I am trying to free you, but we must do this. If you understand, put your arms around me.”

Her arms slid around his waist.

“And you have to submit completely or you’ll be here forever.”

He hoped only he heard the small sound she made, a sob caught in the back of her throat. Rushton's pretty daughter had courage, he found then, for she said in a throaty voice that would due credit to any harem girl, "You are very handsome, my lord. I hope I please you well. Whatever you ask, it is my pleasure to give it."

* * * *

In a second her nightmare had changed. Celia felt almost absently the warm trail of the man's mouth move again down her neck to the junction where it met her shoulder. The kisses were light, his arms holding her against his chest. There must be someone watching them if he worried they could hear even a whisper. The idea of that was unsettling, but she was getting used to having absolutely no privacy. She wished they could speak freely, but apparently they could not.

That didn't matter; the word *free* sang through her blood like a magical incantation. She was now wildly curious about the man who held her in his arms. To say she had been intensely relieved by his physical appearance was an understatement. Instead of old and fat, he *was* handsome, tall and athletic-looking, with dark hair and classic chiseled features. His chest felt very solid as she pressed against it and his touch was gentle and actually very pleasant.

He was English! He knew her father and he was trying to free her!

But, the realization intruded on her joy, she was still naked in his arms, in his bed, and from what he just said, he was going to use her body the way any other man would use it. A confusing array of emotions churned inside her, complicated by the fact that he urged her backwards on the bed so she was in a position that made her feel acutely vulnerable. When he covered her with his

long body, she could feel through the material of his dressing gown an unmistakable length of rigid flesh pressing against her stomach. Lela had graphically explained about male arousal, but Celia had no idea an erect penis would be so big.

She fought down a surge of panic and forced herself to relax. Submit, he'd said, and when his mouth found hers, she slipped her arms around his neck in supplication as if she welcomed his kiss.

His mouth was firm and his tongue traced the line of her lips. She parted, guessing what he wanted, and he tasted her mouth with leisurely exploration, the abrasion of his tongue touching every corner.

"You taste like heaven, like honey," he said softly, kissing her again.

Remembering the potion she'd been given, Celia was now glad she'd taken it. Perhaps that was why she felt so odd, her nipples tingling where they pressed against his chest. As if he could read her mind, he moved, shifting lower, cupping her bare breasts in both hands, lifting the soft flesh as if judging the weight and shape. His thumb grazed over one hardening crest and she gasped, the unexpected pleasure taking her by surprise.

"Your body is responding to me, my sweet virgin," the Englishman murmured. "See how tight your beautiful breasts are becoming. The nipples harden when I touch them." Lowering his head, he began to suckle at her straining flesh and circle with his tongue. Celia lay back and let him continue the tender assault, aware and amazed he was right, she *was* responding, a treacherous curl of excitement unfurling somewhere deep inside. In fact, the sight of him, his dark lashes against his cheeks as he sucked and caressed her breasts, made her want to touch him. Tentatively, she lifted a hand and ran her fingers through the softness of his dark hair and down the tensile strength of his neck.

He shifted again, licking a path downward her stomach.

She caught her breath when he ordered softly, “Spread your legs. I want to look at you.”

Submit.

Lying back on the thick coverlet, she lowered her lashes a fraction and complied, opening her thighs with difficulty, her face flushed in embarrassment.

“Wider. I want to see all of you.”

Obligingly, she opened farther, stifling the urge to protest as his hand slipped between her legs and he touched her intimately. Propped one elbow, his robe open to show his muscular chest, he stared at her exposed sex, running his finger along the crease of her labia lightly, making her stifle a gasp. “I like it bare like this,” he told her, his smile dark and almost teasing, if that could be possible under the circumstances. “I can see how female you are.” Using his long fingers, she felt him part her folds, exposing the tender, protected tissue underneath, holding her cleft open. “So pink and soft, like wet, hot velvet. Have you ever touched yourself here, Celia?”

His fingers drifted very lightly over the most sensitive part of her body and she fought a moan, the sensation was so uniquely exquisite, a throbbing beginning in the very spot he touched. “No,” she managed to admit.

Very carefully, he pushed her apart even more. She could feel the cool air on the vulnerable area he opened so wide. “You should. There is a small nub here.” His fingers glided upward as he spoke. “It is your female equivalent of my male sexual organ. When it is stimulated, you feel intense pleasure and orgasmic release. Let me show you.”

His finger moved, touched someplace she wasn’t even aware existed, and she cried out involuntarily, the feeling was so physically pleasing. She arched as he stroked her again, his fingers circling, causing her to shut her eyes in wonder of the response of her wayward body to that skilled, carnal torture.

“You’re getting very wet,” he murmured, “and your bud is swelling underneath my fingers. That’s good, I want you ready for me when I enter you.”

She barely heard the words, her world nothing but the almost painful pleasure between her legs as he continued to caress with slightly more pressure. “Oh,” she breathed, her hips moving involuntarily as her body trembled.

“You are easily aroused. My fingers are drenched. In fact,” he said huskily, “I think that you are there.”

Where, she thought wildly as her body began to shudder, waves of ecstasy washing through her as she twisted against the touch of his fingers. It felt so sublime for a moment she stopped caring she was in bed with a mysterious stranger, not concerned that some unknown voyeur could see her abandon, but only aware of the exquisite pulse of pleasure. She was barely aware when he removed his hand and stood up, her body still humming as the English stranger who had just done an incredible thing to her slipped out of his robe.

Her eyes widened slightly as she actually saw his cock, erect and stiff against his stomach. It looked even bigger than she had imagined, but instead of being frightened, she was inexplicably intrigued.

She wasn’t going to be a virgin much longer.

* * * *

A man would have to be a saint—and Robert did not qualify—to not feel deep anticipation at the sight of a beautiful woman, still flushed from her recent climax, wide-legged and open for his pleasure.

Between her pale thighs, Celia’s bare cleft glistened with the fluids of sexual arousal, the lips of her labia visibly wet and slightly swollen. Her magnificent breasts rose and fell as she

breathed quickly, her lovely face tinted pink, her mouth parted and her eyes wide as she stared at his blatantly engorged shaft.

There were people watching, he remembered suddenly—incredible as it may seem—almost forgetting. So far, she had done well. He moved back onto the bed, settling between her legs, spreading them wider with his knees. Looking into her eyes, he said, “I need to be inside you.”

As he hoped, she was quick to realize he wanted her to agree out loud for the listening ears to report. “I want you inside me, my lord.” She held out her arms and he covered her, planting a light kiss on her soft mouth before adjusting himself to mount her.

Prodding her female opening with the tip of his swollen penis, he pushed in the crest, stretching her, watching her face to see if she showed pain. The truth was, he’d come this far already, but wasn’t certain if he was actually hurting her he could go on, punishment or no. Her passage felt small and that wasn’t unexpected, but it did remind him that before this moment she was untouched, and he felt a twinge of guilt.

Gentlemanly instincts were unfortunate at times, and this was one of them he told himself wryly, holding her gaze as the sensation of tight wet heat slowly enveloping his rigid cock gripped his whole body. It took some control to fight the urge to simply plunge in and plunder her body with relentless need. He moved forward and withdrew in small thrusts, widening her passage with his progress, feeling with triumph how her hips instinctively began to move with his rhythm. “Am I hurting you?” he asked between his teeth.

“No, my lord,” she said breathlessly. “You just feel...very big.”

A smothered laugh was all he could manage as a response.

Once he was fully embedded inside her, he was sweating and almost frantic for release. He began to move in and out in long, measured strokes, keeping it slow for her untutored body.

“You are deliciously tight,” he told her, noting the returning flush to her cheeks. “Lift your legs and put them around my waist.”

When she obeyed, he was able to push deeper, his pace increasing against his will. Wondering if all virgins were this entrancingly pleasurable, he heard her small sighs turn to moans with almost surprise, realizing she was going to climax again, her inner muscles clenching around his surging penetration.

She cried out in release at the same time he pushed as far as he could and went rigid above her, ejaculating with such force that he gasped at the hot-blooded rush sweeping through his body, shuddering over and over again as he flooded her, flexing inside her passage.

An experienced man, he marveled at the intensity of his release as he collapsed to his side and brought her with him. The duke’s daughter, too, seemed almost raptly dazed and limp. Cradling her delicious body in his arms, savoring the silk of her hair spilling across his bare chest, he wondered if he wasn’t going to enjoy the next two weeks a great deal.

And exactly how, if he were able to take her home, he would explain it to her father.

* * * *

The candles had burned down, the room no longer as bright. The place smelled different than her harem quarters, more masculine, spicy rather than sweet.

“If it pleases you to tell me, I would like to know your name.” Celia said the words softly, peering out from beneath the fringe of her lashes. She wondered if since they had completed the act of intercourse, they were no longer watched. They had been silent for some time, sprawled on top of the blankets, their cooling bodies supine and nestled together. It was odd to lie so intimately with someone she had just met, not that they had even been introduced.

He must have thought they were still being observed, for he murmured, "I am the seventh Earl of Grayson. My given name is Robert, but I prefer for you to address me as you have been. You may call me my lord."

It would have been humiliating, except she saw a hint of apology in his eyes. They were an unusual color, a light gray, almost silver, and he lay back nude against the pillows of the bed, his tanned skin a surprise, as though he had gone often without his shirt in the out of doors. Below the waist, Celia noticed, comfortable as she was in the crook of his arm, he was fair. His legs were long, his body lean and well-muscled, his shoulders wide. Dark hair fell attractively over his brow as he watched her steadily, and he smelled of clean linen and a faint hint of tobacco. No longer erect, his sex was still impressively large, framed in the apex of his thighs and a thatch of dark curly hair.

"Yes, my lord," she said meekly with effort, reminding herself grimly he was trying to help her.

"Your beauty pleases me," he told her, running a hand over the curve of her hip. "You are very desirable, Celia."

"I'm glad you think so," she responded, still trying to sound the subservient servant.

"Tell me, how does a beautiful Englishwoman find herself here?" he asked, still sending a message with his eyes.

It would not be natural if he were not curious, she realized. In fact, the questions had been anticipated for she had been coached to evade any inquiry into her past. Playing the game, she murmured as she was instructed, "How does such a handsome Englishman find himself here, visiting the Sultan?"

Amusement appeared in those silver eyes at her lack of response. "I am a friend of his son, Ali. He was educated in England."

Reaching out a hand, she rubbed it across the hard planes of his chest and said in what she hoped was a seductive tone, "I hope you will be here for a long time, my lord."

"Does that mean you wish to share my bed during my visit?"

Was that the price of her freedom, she wondered. "Yes," she agreed immediately. Her virginity was already gone. Perhaps if she were bedding this English lord, she would not be available to anyone else. Besides, what had just happened hadn't been terrible at all like she expected, but instead gloriously pleasurable.

"I wish it, too," he told her, smiling faintly. "Will you spread your legs for me whenever I want to take you?" he asked with soft compelling command.

She had to fight to keep her expression neutral. Raised in a sheltered environment, protected and pampered, his lurid question was shocking. But then again, what they had just done was shocking, her abduction and captivity *beyond* shocking. No doubt the request was to prove her subservience to their audience, but it was still a difficult promise to make when asked in such a blunt way. Swallowing, she said, "With pleasure, my lord."

His hand moved upward a fraction, so the swell of her right breast rested upon it. "Your breasts are large for someone so slender. They feel like luscious fruit, ripe and firm."

Her lashes drifted downward in anticipation as she felt him begin to caress her supple flesh, toying with her nipple. He stroked, his long-fingered hands warm and skillful; even in her inexperience she sensed a delicacy in his touch. As he massaged her nipples, she felt a twist of excitement in the pit of her stomach.

She sensed something else as well, her eyes widening suddenly. His shaft was thickening, rising from the juncture of his hard thighs, lengthening before her fascinated gaze.

"I want to hold your glorious breasts when I take you this time," he said in a tone laced with obvious masculine need. "Get on your knees."

It was so soon, she thought as she complied with that autocratic order, and was it even necessary? She had done everything he asked so far; surely she was compliant enough to escape punishment?

Not understanding as he pushed her forward so she was braced on her hands as well as her knees, she felt him reach from behind her to cup her breasts at the same time she felt the nudge of something hard at her feminine opening. "Move your knees apart," he breathed in her ear, "it will make my entrance easier. You are still slick with my discharge, this will not hurt."

On the contrary, she discovered as he pushed with slow inexorable force into her passage from behind, it felt not only decadent, but pleasurable to have her breasts caressed as her body was stretched and invaded. When he began to move in and out, she closed her eyes against the delicious friction, her breathing growing ragged. His desire for her body gave her some fraction of power—however little it may be—and she began to push backward with each of his forward thrusts, hearing his swift intake of breath as he sank to the hilt, her own soft sounds filling the room.

When he firmly grasped her chest and increased the motion, she felt a rise in tension that she welcomed, his plunging foray making her pant, her hair swinging into her eyes as she was shoved forward, yet held in place by his hands at her breasts.

Surrendering to the onslaught of sensation, she gave a small scream as she climaxed, muffled as her arms gave way and she buried her face in one of the silken pillows. Tiny rapturous contractions rippled through her vagina, tightening it around his surging cock. His hands went to her hips as he held hard for one last deep thrust and the hot urgent spurt of his release spilled against her trembling womb.

When he withdrew, she sighed briefly as his softening cock slid free. Her body felt sated and used, but the sensation was not all what she had dreaded with every fiber of her being. In fact, when

he dropped beside her on his back, his muscular chest still lifting rapidly, and he smiled at her, she smiled back in a sort of wonder.

“Did you enjoy that?” he asked, his voice husky, his silver eyes intent.

“Yes,” she answered shyly but truthfully.

“Your beautiful body was meant for the act of love.”

Perhaps that was true, for certainly he was still a stranger in almost every way and she *had* shamelessly enjoyed what had happened between them. Her cheeks felt slightly hot when she recalled the way she had cried out loudly as she climaxed. “That I satisfy you, my lord, is all that matters.”

As if he knew how much it cost her to say the obsequious words in such a demure tone, he leaned forward and kissed her softly. Then he whispered in an almost inaudible voice against her lips, “You did very well, Lady Celia.”

* * * *

Her face pressed to the wall, Lela smiled in delighted triumph as she peered through the eyepiece. The two lovers were beautiful together, she decided as she watched the way they moved in supple penetration and acceptance.

The tall English nobleman had certainly accepted his gift with enthusiasm, and there was no doubt he had been well-serviced with utter and complete acquiescence to his desires. As she watched, he thrust hard between the open legs of the woman beneath him and went very still, his handsome face dark in the moment of orgasmic release and his lean body shuddering slightly as he found the pinnacle of his pleasure once again. Moments later, in the tumble of the silken bed linens they rested together in an intimate embrace, both looking half-asleep from sexual surfeit.

Things could not have gone better.

Though she had harbored fears over the stubborn Infidel woman's compliance, the girl had been amazingly cooperative for one so young and proud. More than that, Lela had heard her pretty charge moan in open abandon as her body was used, obviously enjoying the act of intercourse since she also found fulfillment.

With a smothered yawn, Lela withdrew, confident they would sleep now. It was very late, but the Sultan's honored guest was obviously a virile man with a substantial sexual appetite.

Her master would be very pleased.

Chapter 3

Sunlight burned against her fluttering eyelids. Not wanting to surrender the comfort of slumber, Celia stirred reluctantly, vaguely aware that an insistent hand pressed her bare shoulder.

“Come, we must go.”

With effort, she sat up. Celia looked around her as an almost dazed awareness invaded her mind. The room, so different the night before in the light of dozens of lamps, was large and spacious, the housing of a prince or an honored guest. The bed, where she still lay amid the tangled linens, was enormous, set up on a marble dais, and the high windows shown blocks of sun across the shining floor.

She was naked, she realized, and as the night before came flooding back, warmth crept into her face.

“I have drawn a cool bath.” Lela tugged her to her feet. “Let me cover you and we’ll return to your quarters.”

“Yes,” she agreed, rising, submissive as Lela put a robe around her shoulders and wrapped it around her. After traveling the myriad of corridors, Celia was actually grateful to be back in her own small room, the bathwater in the marble tub inviting.

Lela said soothingly as she slid the robe from her shoulders, “You are tired, it is understandable. You did well, pretty one, and he desired you greatly, did he not? Look at you, there is so much sperm inside you it runs yet from your body.”

It was true, her thighs were sticky and there was more seeping from between her legs. Celia laughed, a weak effort. "I'm quite sore."

"Bathe. It will help." Lela urged her into the water.

Celia closed her eyes as she sank into the bath. It was true; the cool water eased the throbbing between her thighs.

"You should not have asked him his name. Otherwise, I was pleased. The Sultan, too, will be satisfied as well to know you pleased his honored guest so thoroughly."

Was it Lela who watched them? Celia wished she dared to ask, but she didn't.

"Your English lord, he is gentle with you, yes, and yet he has a magnificent staff, so bold and stiff." Lela ran soothing fingers through her hair, reaching for the soap. "You should be honored he wishes to have you again."

Half-dozing from the pleasure of the water, Celia let herself be bathed and dried. Not even protesting when Lela insisted she be shaved again—though the glide of the blade over her swollen labia made her flinch—she was simply too tired to complain. When the older woman produced the jar of salve again, she let her legs fall open willingly, some of the soreness easing as the cool gel was applied to her vaginal passage.

Sleep overtook her the moment she fell on her pallet.

* * * *

The Arabian mare was magnificent. Snowy white and small, she stood with her ears pricked forward, her liquid eyes seeming to watch their every move. Ali offered her a lump of sugar and she nibbled daintily from his palm, the lady-like mannerism almost comic. "You should see her sire," he told Robert. "He's as fast as the wind and even more well-mannered. Perhaps we should race,

you and I. Pick out a mount from my stable and we'll see if you are impressed with the speed and endurance of my horses."

Ali was built like many of his race, compact, wiry, with almost delicate bone structure and toffee skin. Yet, though the Sultan's son might be shorter and smaller, Robert had learned years before that his friend's fierce competitive spirit was a powerful force. He said with a laugh, "I am sure I would be choking on your dust the entire time, my friend."

"Perhaps," the prince said, grinning, "you are too tired to challenge me. I am told the English girl still sleeps."

"There are no secrets it seems," Robert replied after a moment, not wanting to give away he knew they'd been watched, "even in a place the size of your father's palace."

"It is a large palace, but a small world."

"I see."

"My father is pleased you enjoyed her."

"I am pleased I enjoyed her."

Chuckling, Ali murmured, "The harem is a place for women's gossip, they have little else to do. The pale-haired girl is unusual, that's why she has garnered such attention. You are also different. An English lord come to settle into our ways for even a short while and a slave.. Together you are the source of much interest."

Robert hesitated, rubbing the mare's soft nose. "Will your father let me take her with me when I leave?"

Ali cocked a brow. "What will you tell the esteemed duke, her father, once you get her home?"

When he quickly glanced over in surprise, Robert saw the open amusement in Ali's eyes. "You've known all along who she is?"

"Yes." Ali's smile faded slightly. "Lela told me her claims, and according to all accounts, she is not only beautiful, but well-educated and not easily trained to subservience. It makes sense the girl is telling the truth. I suppose, with your strange Western ways, you are now thinking I should have done something to free her

myself. But you must understand that my father is of another time, one of a dying breed. In his mind, the old customs stand and his word is still law here, inviolate. We have no Parliament, no House of Lords to debate the ethics of this matter. I would not challenge him, especially over a woman, and an Infidel woman at that. He would not see the point of sending her home, and definitely not understand that her father might urge retaliation. You have done a wise thing, accepting her on my father's terms was the only way."

That fact had been made glaringly clear by Abdul, so Robert didn't argue it.

"I understand." He gave the mare a final pat. "But my question still stands, do you think, since she was a gift and seems to please me well, he will let me take her?"

"Perhaps we should keep her. By all accounts, she screamed her pleasure as you took her and you kept her awake all night." Ali's smile faded as he saw something in Robert's expression, one brow elevating. "Ah...the wind blows that way, does it? You have a possessive look in your eyes, my friend, and so soon. I was joking, of course, at least on my part. I cannot say if the gift was for your stay and my father will want to keep the English girl, or if he will allow you to take her home. As long as she continues to please you each night, you honor him."

"She seems to understand her future is uncertain, and cooperation is the best course." Robert grinned, remembering her open sexual abandon of the night before. "For a virgin, she is either a remarkable actress or born to enjoy the earthy pleasures in life. I have to say I am enchanted, by both her undeniable beauty and her passion."

"Attachment to this female will bring you nothing but trouble once you are home," Ali warned. "All women are the same between their legs, my friend. If my father refuses to let her go, it may save you a great deal of grief."

Not all women were the same, thought Robert, recalling a sweet soft mouth and a luscious, receptive body. At least by talking to Ali he knew his intention had succeeded. The Sultan knew he had pleased and been pleased, and Miss Davenport would not be punished nor sent into the distant bowels of the harem.

Instead, she would grace his bed again that evening.

* * * *

Lela must a be a witch, Celia decided, or else the healing properties of sleep had wrought miracles, because she felt fine, perhaps a bit tender, but really quite herself.

In fact, for the first time since she had been brought to the palace, she felt hopeful.

"I see you are ready and maybe a bit anxious, pretty one."

Celia turned and saw that Lela had slipped in the door unheard, her dark brows lifted. The woman asked, "Are you naked beneath the robe? Are you ready for him?"

Color washed Celia's cheeks. "Yes."

"And your woman's passage, does it still feel so sore from his use of it?"

It was an indelicate subject and uncomfortable, but Celia admitted, "Not as much as I thought it would. The lotion must work."

"Yes, it can be miraculous." Lela glided across the floor in her graceful way and handed her a small box. "Here, this for you from your master, the Sultan. Even his own exalted son, our prince, says the English lord is mad with desire for you."

Curious, Celia lifted the lid, finding inside the silk-lined interior a small bag.

"Look inside," Lela urged, smiling.

When she poured the contents out into her palm, Celia stared. Four perfect pearls, the quality of which she had never seen, shone against her skin. "They're lovely. Why would he give them to me, whom he considers a slave?" She dared to ask the question because Lela seemed so pleased with her at the moment.

"One for each time the Englishman found satisfaction inside you," Lela answered simply. "Our master is generous and once he showered me with such gifts." She lightly touched the strings of glowing gems around her neck. "The Infidel lord is special, I believe, a symbol of our growing connection with your race, our progression into the modern world."

Slipping the gems back into the bag and putting them in box, Celia snapped the lid shut. A little shy, embarrassed but having no one else to talk to, she asked bluntly, "Will I be able to allow him to...have me? I was so sore this morning."

"He will want to mount you, men are so insatiable." Lela's eyes gleamed for a moment. "And yes, you should not experience too much discomfort because of the cream, but also because this one takes care to ready you, making sure you are properly wet and receptive. He is a rare lover, pretty one, remember, do whatever he asks."

"I will," Celia said softly. *If freedom is at the end of the asking, I most certainly will.*

A certain exhilaration built in her stomach this time as she followed Lela down the convoluted corridors, which was a decided contrast to the sick dread of the night before. When she heard the sound of his voice answer the knock, she had to quell a small thrill at just the sound of it.

Lord Grayson obviously waited for her, standing by the bed in the same long black robe that flattered his tall, muscular form. This time Lela didn't do more than push her gently into the room and close the door.

Not quite certain just what to do and walking uncertainly forward, Celia stopped a few feet from him and lowered her gaze in an act of unspoken deference.

“Come to me,” he bid her and she took a few more steps, feeling his hands at her shoulders as he disrobed her. “I believe have you grown more beautiful since last night,” he murmured. With one long finger under her chin, he tilted her face upward and lowered his head to kiss her thoroughly. His hands slid across her bare skin as their mouths melded together.

When he broke the kiss, his gaze held hers for a moment. “I am hungry for you, go lie down.”

The autocratic tone of his voice spoke volumes. Obviously, he believed they were being watched again, and from her earlier conversation with Lela, Celia had no doubt that was true. She obeyed, climbing up on the bed and lying on her back. Her heart was already beating rapidly and she could feel her breasts swelling as her body anticipated what came next. As he slipped out of his robe, she saw he also reacted to her presence naked and waiting in his bed. His erection was already growing engorged, rising against his stomach and when he joined her, she could feel the velvet steel of it brush her thigh.

“Here,” he said, to her surprise taking each of her hands and pulling her arms over her head. Before she even understood what he was doing, silken cords were looped snugly around her wrists and she was bound to the bed. Taking a pillow, he slipped it under her head and shoulders, slightly elevating her upper body. “I like this,” he said, a dark smile on his well-shaped mouth as he stared at the length of her supine form. “It lifts your breasts high and emphasizes their abundance and perfection. I’ve traveled the world and had my share of lovers and few women have such creamy skin, such firm graceful form, and your nipples are a rare shade of delicate pink.”

She held her breath, waiting for him to touch the quivering mounded flesh held in opulent display, but to her disappointment, he placed his hand instead on the flat plane of her stomach.

“I will feast on them later,” he promised, a hint of laughter in his low tone, “for I see your need in your eyes, but first I want to taste something else.” He moved lower, his hand sliding over the curve of her hip, and he lifted her legs, spreading them open and placing her feet on the bed, so her knees were bent and her cleft displayed as blatantly as her upper body. “You already weep for me, my sweet, look.”

She felt him run a finger across her sex and the light pressure brought a dizzying stab of pleasure. He held up his finger and she could see he was right, it gleamed with pearly moisture. A dull ache had begun between her open legs, a needy throb that obliterated any embarrassment she should have felt. She simply swallowed and watched him as he shifted and moved between her parted thighs, startled when he settled down, his mouth a scant inch from her pulsing center. Disbelieving of his shocking intention, she gasped when she felt the first touch of his tongue probing between her female slit and sliding across the tender flesh beneath. The heat and delirious sensation of it was incredible and she instantly felt a rush of warm liquid in her passage and labia.

God in heaven. She threw her head back, held immobile by her bonds, not even realizing that she’d said the words out loud until he laughed, his mouth pressing closer to her wet, aching sex, his tongue pillaging with relentless strokes. He licked her opening, pushing inside, and she moaned her enjoyment, shamelessly spreading her legs as wide as she could to give him more access, no longer caring about anything but the inexorable rise of pleasure. Alternately slipping through her labia to lick and caress, then imitating the act of love by orally invading her vagina, he brought her to an almost frenzied peak. And when he parted her folds and suckled the tiny bud he’d touched the night before, she shattered

with a small scream, twisting against her bonds, the rush of sexual release so blissfully intense she felt shock after shock ripple through her.

When Celia could finally breathe again, she opened her eyes and saw that Robert watched her, still lying in the same position, his hands warm on her trembling inner thighs as he held her open. “Men,” he said, his voice a bit husky, his silver eyes glittering with obvious arousal, “might not have to deal with the inconvenient bodily functions necessary for childbearing, but women’s bodies do have one advantage over ours. While we take a while to recover from sexual climax, women can come time and again. Shall I demonstrate?”

He meant to...oh God, she couldn’t help it, her body was so vividly aroused that when he covered her engorged nub with his mouth again she convulsed immediately, sheer unadulterated ecstasy controlling her body. He stayed there, kissing her inner thighs for a moment as the sensation lessened, and then once more licked that tiny erotic spot and pushed her over the edge again.

And again.

“Please stop,” she finally begged him weakly. “I want to please you, my lord, but I cannot breathe.”

“Very well.” He rose, lifting a brow as he moved over her, his smile wickedly sensual as she felt the pressure of his enormous erection begin to stretch her slick wet entrance. “I find great pleasure in your carnal abandon, my dear, but I don’t think I can wait any longer anyway. But later,” he added, his voice dropping as he penetrated her body, distending her vaginal walls to accommodate his need, “you will come again for me, I promise.”

Tied in her submissive pose, she closed her eyes and felt the slide of his sex in and out between her legs. The tip pushed against her still trembling womb with each thrust before he retreated, his urgency increasing, his chest brushing her uplifted breasts as he surged forward. He closed his eyes as he suddenly went very still

and his orgasmic release erupted inside her, his body rigid as he braced himself. She could still feel the spasms against her inner walls for what seemed like an eternity.

He opened his eyes and stared down at her. "You are a rare jewel, sweet Celia, and you inspire great passion."

From the way he spoke, she knew it was for the benefit of the Sultan's spies. Lying there, tied and impaled, she said softly, "And you are wonderfully... talented in the art of pleasure, my lord."

He laughed then, easing free of her body, dropping next to her. "How do you know? You were a virgin until yesterday and have known only me."

"I was raised in a society where it was not all uncommon for wives to dutifully grant their husbands conjugal rights only long enough to beget an heir. Many of them openly express their distaste for the act of sex." Celia spoke slowly, careful to not mention England directly, though she was sure he would know she spoke of their own class, the fashionable upper class society where very often marriages were matters of convenience and finance, rather than affection. She smiled and added with an arch note, "So it cannot be possible all men are capable of giving such pleasure in bed, can it?"

Beside her in his careless lounging pose, he was large and overpoweringly male. "Or perhaps not all women are passionate enough to embrace it? You have an unusual sensuality, my sweet."

Her brow knitted. Was she passionate? It was her duty to marry as her father wished; she had certainly never contemplated whether or not she would enjoy sexual relations with her future husband. Yet here she was, tied nude to a bed in an exotic palace in a world far removed from her own, engaging in the most erotic acts with a perfect stranger...and finding a hidden paradise of carnal sensation she never dreamed could exist. "I cannot seem to help it," she confessed. "My body enjoys your touch."

“That’s convenient, I like touching your body.” His hand lifted, hovering over one uplifted breast. “Are your arms aching? If so, I’ll untie you.”

“I’m fine,” she lied. They *were* starting to protest a little from being stretched above her head, but suddenly all her focus was on his large hand, promising his touch.

She was wanton, she thought as he began to lightly caress the swell of each breast, a sigh of enjoyment escaping her lips. But since she had no choice but to be there pleasing him, finding her own pleasure was some compensation.

“Did you know the Sultan gave you to me as a gift,” he asked, touching her nipple with a forefinger, delicately circling the areola. “He thought I would appreciate your glorious beauty and soft white skin. He was absolutely right.”

Not sure what he wanted her to say, she murmured, “He honors me. I am lucky to grace your bed, my lord.”

“I am only here for ten more days.” His voice was laced with regret. “I fear it is not long enough to thoroughly sample all of your charms, though I intend to try, sweet Celia, be warned.” His smile was wolfish and predatory. “You are no longer pure. I am not sure of their custom in regard to this, but maybe the Sultan will understand my passion for you and let me take you with me.”

That explained everything. She had been puzzled that if he had known her identity, he still accepted her into his bed. Since he had told her himself that he knew her father, she had wondered how he could honorably justify accepting her sexual favors, even if they had been given as a gift from his barbaric host.

Ten days more, her mind registered, distracted by the delightful circle he made around her swelling nipple. In ten days perhaps she might be on her way back to England.

Wickedly, another thought intruded. For ten days, she would spend her nights in the arms of Lord Grayson.

Both notions were extremely pleasing.

Meekly, she said, "I would like that, my lord."

* * * *

It had to be nearly dawn, a vague light making the high windows of his room opaque. Robert lay on his side, watching the woman next to him as she slept, his relaxed pose in direct opposition to the fact he was fully aroused. His cock was rock hard and almost painfully erect, the distended tip throbbing in time with his heartbeat.

Jesus, he was like some randy adolescent, he thought in wry amusement. Maybe it was the fantasy of the setting and situation, for what man wouldn't like the idea of having a beautiful sexual slave to service him in any way he wished.

Only this particular slave, he reminded himself, was not exactly some eager harem girl. However, that aside, Lady Celia seemed to have embraced both the notion of the cost of her freedom and the manner in which it was to be bought. Rarely had he known such a responsive lover, and considering her inexperience, it was both surprising and infinitely intriguing.

Infinitely.

Awakening an hour before, he had listened to the soft sounds of her gentle breathing in the darkness of the chamber, the musky smell of lovemaking mingling with her own floral fragrance. She had earlier fallen asleep in his arms, exhausted and replete, and his own body had craved rest.

But now he was wide, wide awake.

And wanting.

No one would be watching them now, he told himself. He'd taken her time and again and surely even the woman Lela would know Miss Davenport had pleased him.

Which meant, of course, he should leave her alone.

The gentleman in him reminded that he would have her tonight again and letting her sleep now was the courteous thing to do. Another voice, this one slightly more self-centered, urged him to wake her and avail himself her soft, enticing body.

After all, she was his—a gift.

She was also a person, not an object simply for his pleasure.

Damn.

But, her body, the insidious voice whispered in his brain, could not lie, no matter if the duke's beautiful daughter knew she had to act the submissive courtesan or not. There was no doubt that she experienced arousal and sexual completion in his arms, her feverish response to his touch evident in the betraying wetness between her thighs and the marked changes in her full, sublime breasts.

In fact, she *liked* it when he fucked her, Robert rationalized.

And he wanted her right now.

Celia lay on her side, one hand beneath her cheek, her pink lips softly parted. The wealth of her silky golden hair covered the pillows and tumbled across her smooth, graceful back. Nude, she slumbered in unselfconscious openness, her slim body dappled with the growing early morning light.

In surrender to base temptation, he reached out and touched her, easing his hand carefully between the juncture of her slender thighs where they rested together in her repose.

She was warm and deliciously soft, her legs supple and smooth. Moving very slowly upward, he found the moist folds of her sex, feeling the slickness of his own spilled seed mingled with the womanly fluids of her previous pleasure. He began a subtle invasion with his fingers, stroking her lightly as she slept, his fingers caressing the slick satin crevasses, rewarded when she murmured something unintelligible and moved restlessly, rolling on to her back.

With a triumphant smile, he followed her movement, continuing the gentle assault on her body, his fingers smoothly intruding between her legs. Her passage, he discovered as he slipped a finger cautiously inside her vagina, was thick with semen. The walls were so soft and welcoming that he fought a surge of sudden excitement that made his shaft jerk and throb in anticipation.

She moaned then, her thighs falling apart for his questing hand, her lashes fluttering as she obviously began to be aware of what he was doing to her.

He needed to take her soon, his impatience not at all normal, especially after two nights of excessive sexual indulgence. Adding another finger to the one already moving in deft penetration, he continued the rhythm until he could see she was truly coming awake, her hips already tilting up at each stroke of his hand.

“Oh,” she moaned.

With satisfaction he felt the rush of dampness increase between her legs and removed his hand to replace it with his rigid arousal, her gasp and the sudden opening of her eyes showing she was truly and suddenly most definitely awake. He entered her just as her hands came up to his shoulders, her fingers grasping tightly.

“I need you now,” he explained tersely. “I’ll make this up to you, my sweet, I promise.”

All thoughts of slow, seductive lovemaking were pushed aside in the light of her tightness around his raging erection and his own unusual lack of self-control. He moved in wild thrusts, his breathing ragged, her small hands imploring on his rigid muscles, and in seconds he ejaculated in a river of rushing orgasmic sensation, pleasure rolling in waves over his body as he flexed and pulsed inside her.

When he was sated and softening, he gently pulled away. Gathering Celia in his arms, he murmured into her silken, fragrant

hair with a certain wonder, "I feel I am under some sort of exotic spell. This place, this situation...and you."

Her breath was light against his chest, her body soft and perfect in his arms. "How do you think *I* feel? Suddenly captive and...so helpless," she whispered for his ears alone.

"I cannot imagine. Is this fate? Was I brought here just to find you?"

"My lord," she sighed softly, settling against him, "I hope so."

* * * *

They spoke sometimes in soft voices, words she could not catch. It would be wise to punish the girl for it, but then again, that might displease their guest.

In fact, Lela was sure it would displease him if his gift was chastised.

It was more than that also, Lela knew, as she frowned and walked along the corridor toward her room. There was something about how the Infidel lord looked at the golden English girl that was almost disturbing; an intensity in his expression that was unexpected.

Lela believed in love, though she had never known it personally. Oh yes, she had borne the Sultan a child and adored her daughter, so maternal love was no mystery. However, her devotion to her master was based on duty and expectation and her feelings had never been taken into consideration by him at any time. What they had shared was lust, but there was also a measure of affection, for at one time she had pleased him more than any of the many others he could choose.

But romantic love?

The concept was startling. It was surely too soon for the two foreigners to feel such a thing, for though they were lovers in every sense, they had known only two nights together.

What happened, she wondered uneasily, if their exalted guest truly did not want to leave the girl behind? After all, she also claimed to be of noble blood. Was it possible they knew each other before coming together here in the palace? No, she quickly reassured herself, her charge had been a virgin, she had felt the barrier herself.

Despite her misgivings, she found herself suddenly smiling at the notion of a love affair from what was normally a very straightforward, unemotional transaction. More often than not men used women callously and walked away.

Though it would be complicated, she suddenly hoped this particular situation would not work out that way.

Chapter 4

Celia could feel the pulse in her throat race as they approached Robert's room. It was as if she had become conditioned to a predictable response and her body recognized that door as the promise of unbridled sexual pleasure. The sound of Lela's knock made a flush spread over her skin.

What would tonight hold, she wondered?

After six nights of giving her body to Lord Grayson, she knew he was not only tireless and passionate, but inventive. It was not like he simply climbed between her legs and pumped inside her until he found satisfaction, he varied the way they made love. Just remembering some of the positions they had used made her blush. On the fourth night she had to come to him, he had even penetrated her anus with his finger, pushing deep as he nibbled at her cleft, the sensation painfully exquisite with the dual possession of mouth and the shocking invasion of his touch. She had exploded in reckless release, open-legged for his oral assault, clenching against that probing finger, crying out loud at the sheer decadent joy of it.

It was embarrassing; it was startling, but she *had* discovered in herself a sensuality that was liberated by either by the fact that she had no choice but to let him use her body, or that Robert St. Claire was an exceptional lover. Or perhaps it was both.

Once inside the room, she immediately loosened her robe and discarded it so she was nude, hearing Lela close the door behind her.

“It pleases me,” his deep voice spoke, “when you are so anxious to be naked and available to me.” Robert lounged on the pillows of the bed, his own robe open to the waist.

Her rapid pulse increased at the sight of him, lying there like some dark exotic prince, unconcealed carnal promise in his silver eyes. Almost forgetting to pretend submissive deference, she walked slowly toward him.

“Your breasts sway as you move,” he told her, narrowing his gaze. “It is beautiful to see the weight of your flesh in such graceful motion. They are like an offering to me, so high and proud and generous.”

She could almost feel the heat of his burning stare warming her breasts and her nipples peaked instantly, hardening into taut buds.

“I want to play with them, will you let me?”

The soft, teasing question made her take in her breath. “Of course, my lord,” she said, hearing the needy note in her voice but unable to help it. She climbed on to the bed and edged toward where he sat, on her knees with her chest toward him, her bare, uplifted breasts exposed and presented for his touch.

“You seem eager,” he murmured, open amusement in his expression. “I like that. You are a pleasure, so receptive, so willing to open for me, offer me the perfumed paradise of your warm body, Celia.”

“I serve you in every way, my lord,” she agreed, aching for him to touch her. When he did, sliding his hands over the roundness of her offered flesh, she savored the sensation, her head titled slightly back and her long hair falling to spill over her shoulders and the backs of her legs.

“It would be interesting, wouldn’t it, to see how close I can bring you to climax using only these.” He cupped both breasts and lifted them high, simply holding them in his large hands.

The idea excited her, and he knew it. She knelt there, his palms cradling her welling flesh, and waited with an almost breathless anticipation.

She was not disappointed. He simply stroked at first, light subtle caresses that enticed, his fingers molding and testing the pliant nature of her skin and tissue, not touching her nipples but simply brushing past them until she bit her lip to keep from begging. Closing her eyes, she stayed quiet and still, the world nothing but his hands at her breasts and the heavy aching fullness of desire. When he eventually did lean over to run his tongue lightly around one tight, straining peak, she couldn't control the soft sound trapped in her throat, nor the heat and moisture increasing between her thighs.

"Shall I suck on them?" he asked, his voice betraying his own building need.

"Yes," she said on a breath, and when his lips closed over one quivering peak, she ran her fingers through his hair, clasping him close. He drew her far into the heated recess of his mouth, sucking hard. Celia, with her eyes still closed, found it hard to believe that such delectable sensation could exist. Her other breast ached, unfulfilled, until he transferred his attention to it, sucking, licking and touching, bringing her to a trembling level of arousal.

"You're shaking, my sweet," Robert murmured against one pink, full nipple. "I can hear you breathe. Are you close?"

She *was* close she realized, the throbbing between her legs intense. "I want you inside me," she said without even remembering that she should stay the obedient servant. "Now."

She was on her back in a flash, his arms hooked under legs, lifting her knees, her hips pulled off the bed. As he positioned himself between her legs, she felt with a sort of joyous wonder the thick tip of his rigid erection as he forced her open with his impetuous entrance. She began to climax almost at once, needy and frantic as he took his pleasure, her vaginal passage tightening

around the slide of his measured thrusts. The wash of release consumed her world and she was barely even aware of how he drove inside her again and again until he spilled himself with a low oath, his hips pressed so tightly to the apex of her spread thighs that she felt as if they were one creature caught in a stormy tempest of passion.

* * * *

If he didn't fuck her half to death, Robert thought lazily as he laid there, his fingers drifting down the fall of her silken hair, he would be surprised. Celia reclined next to him, the two of them silent since their last tempestuous joining some time before, the room quiet and lit by low flickering lamps. The golden light emphasized the pure perfection of her form; her lovely smooth shoulders, those opulent, lush breasts, her flat stomach and graceful hips ...

Her bottom was also divertingly faultless, rounded and pale above the length of her legs. He loved the way those creamy mounds fit into his hand, firmer than her breasts, but just as softly feminine and alluring.

"You have," he broke the silence by whispering, "a beautiful ass. Have I mentioned it?"

The use of the crude word made her glance up, her eyes wide and startled. She lowered her gaze, the muscles in her throat moving smoothly as she swallowed. "If that is a compliment, my lord, I thank you."

Rubbing his hand over her hip, he touched the firm curve behind it and squeezed lightly. "Roll over on your stomach, let me look at it."

After nearly a week of sexual initiation in his bed, she hesitated only a second before complying. He took a breath as she turned face down, the elegant curve of her spine and long length of legs a

lesson in the beauty of the human form. Not all women enjoyed anal penetration, he knew that, and she was too small and too delicate for him to take her that way with his cock. But...he *had* promised her he would make up for waking her from a sound sleep the other morning, taking his own satisfaction with almost violent speed. She had liked it when he had pushed into her anus with his finger before and she had climaxed with a fierce rush; he had felt the nectar of her sexual juices flow into his mouth the second he had touched her in that sensitive, forbidden spot.

Rolling to his knees, he rubbed her bare bottom lightly, his fingers tracing the small crease where her cheeks met her upper thighs. "So perfect," he said, sliding his hands along her hips.

Celia lay very still, facedown, unmoving, but somehow he sensed the rising sense of stimulation inside her. It was almost as if they were so in tune sexually that he knew what would arouse and excite her. Slightly spreading her cheeks, he examined the deep cleft of her buttocks, seeing the small puckered hole there with a flare of inner arousal. It was so small, he thought with wonder, yet those nerves so very sensitive. Letting his finger drift down the crevasse, he paused at that delicate opening, pushing the pad of his finger lightly against it, feeling her tense.

"Relax," he said soothingly.

She didn't move, supine, his finger resting on that vulnerable spot, her body a symbol of female submission and her glorious hair in disarray over her shoulders.

"You enjoyed this," he asked her, applying a little more pressure but not penetrating the tiny opening, "when I did it before, didn't you?"

A breath escaped, her bottom rising perhaps a little. "If you say so, my lord."

"I am not telling, I am asking."

"I enjoyed it."

He wasn't certain if she was merely being obedient or truthful, but he placed his hands inside her thighs and spread them apart. Robert moved between them, leaving her still face down, arms at her side, her legs wide open and her bottom displayed invitingly in front of him. Kneeling there, he reached down between her legs and found her sex with the fingers of his right hand, sliding them inside her vaginal passage, coating them with the fluids of their previous intercourse. She sighed slightly as he withdrew from her slick entrance, only to sharply catch her breath when he opened her buttocks again and his lubricated finger probed her small hole. He whispered. "Don't fight this. It is akin to almost painful pleasure, the sensation unique. I think you'll like it, my sweet, passionate Celia."

He began to penetrate, easing into the incredible tightness of her anus, going very slowly. Her face was averted, but her body slightly tense, and as he worked inside a little at a time, she made a small whimper that changed to a gasp when he was embedded to his knuckle. She was hot, the muscles of her rectum clenching around his invasion, and he probed further, finally burying his finger as far as he could go.

Celia moaned as he began to withdraw and he saw her hands fist in the blankets. He pulled out almost completely, then inexorably shafted her with his finger again, this time the access easier, his wet finger sliding in. Her shoulders rose and fell, indicating her swift breathing. Continuing the process, he gently imitated the act of sex using his finger and her anal opening, in and out slowly, realizing that she was beginning to moan fitfully. With his other hand he caressed her inner thigh and then her sex, finding the swelling bud of her clitoris. The dual stimulation made her cry out suddenly and she began to push against the inward slide of his intruding finger, her hips lifting against his hand, the small sounds coming from her throat frantic.

He was also very aroused at the erotic sight of her open legs, her satiny bottom displayed for his use, his finger moving in and out. When she began to gasp and shake, he almost went over the edge himself, her tiny muscles gripping his finger with frantic need, her body quivering as she cried out and arched backwards.

Slowly he eased his finger and smoothed his hands over her cheeks again, going to his hands and knees behind her. Using those two soft mounds, he rubbed his pulsing penis between them, the friction delicious. In seconds he was ready to explode and he drew back enough that when he ejaculated with a low groan of carnal joy, his semen spurted over her pale skin in a hot, wet river, filling her crack, running between her legs.

Now that was an inexplicably arousing sight, he thought. His thick sperm over her bottom, running in decadent rivulets over the smooth curves. Breathing heavily, he smoothed some the creamy substance downward, her female cleft already wet.

“Don’t move,” he told her, getting up to walk across to where a basin and towel sat in the corner, cleaning his hand and then coming back to wipe his discharge from her bottom. With a careless toss he discarded the soiled cloth and climbed back onto the bed. Robert gently rolled her over, using his knees to push her legs apart as he settled between them. As if he hadn’t just climaxed, he still felt acutely aroused and wanting, and he kissed her deeply as he entered her.

This time his lovemaking was slow and tender. He stopped often to press his mouth to her soft, warm lips, to whisper in her ear, and fondle her breasts. She climaxed twice before he finally surrendered to orgasmic release. In the aftermath, he pulled Celia possessively close, holding her against his body and feeling her almost instant slide into exhausted sleep.

“What do you do to me?” he murmured out loud, gazing into her face as she lay in his arms, his hand reaching up to trace the curve of her cheek. She was more than just beautiful and

passionate, he realized, seeing the long length of lashes on her delicate cheeks, the vulnerable curve of her slender throat.

How on earth he could take her back to England and never touch her again?

Chapter 5

The desert wind blew hot across his face and the exhilarating rush of speed was incredible. Robert leaned low over the neck of his mount and urged the Barbary stallion to a faster pace, feeling the horse's mane whip against his throat and mouth.

It wasn't until they reached the outskirts of the sprawling city that he pulled up, grinning, controlling the prancing horse with a skilled hand. Ali pounded up a fraction later, his mount sending a spray of sand from under his hooves as he came to a fractious halt. Robert said, "I won."

A little breathless, but also laughing, Ali argued, "*He* won, my friend."

"He's magnificent. Look at him. He still wants to run, even as far as we have come. Does he never tire?" Feeling the bunched muscles underneath him and impatient energy as the horse danced sideways, Robert tightened the rein.

"Never." Ali turned his horse toward the city gates, patting his mount on the shoulder in mock sympathy. "Well done, Hazan, you did fine, but no one can beat the black, even when his rider is a clumsy Infidel."

Robert chuckled. He had been practically born on a horse and knew he was a skilled rider, but the horsemanship of Ali's people was beyond compare. Urging the stallion into step beside his friend, he said, "Such speed...it's exciting, almost primal, like—"

"Sex?" Ali supplied, grinning.

"Perhaps." Robert laughed. "It is certainly a rush of physical sensation."

“Which would you rather have, my English friend, I am curious. The black—my finest horse—or the girl?”

“The girl.”

Ali’s fine brows shot up. “No hesitation, that is frightening for you.”

“She is...captivating.”

“A captivating captive, what an odd notion. Perhaps you should guard against too much of an attachment to her, Robert. Women are for one thing only. Use her body but do not soften toward her otherwise.”

It was a little too late, he was afraid. Curiously, Robert asked, “Have you never entertained the notion that some day you might encounter the woman who not only satisfies your needs but also charms you in other ways?”

Ali shook his head, rolling his eyes theatrically heavenward. “Allah, please protect my dear friend from this sentimental ideal he obviously harbors in his English blood. You must forgive him because he is from a race that writes sonnets to the color of a woman’s hair, and composes music to please their ears.”

One of the things Robert had always enjoyed when in Ali’s company was his surprisingly dry wit. Amused, he lifted a brow. “I am serious. Never?”

Ali laughed. “Who knows? I am not my father, who orders that his women not speak to him when he takes his pleasure, but neither do I see myself with only one female for eternity. All I can say is if she exists, we have not yet met.”

Robert wasn’t sure he could say the same. He had now been at the palace for twelve days, his visit drawing to a close. During that time, he had spent his days with Ali, finding a fascinating window into a different world; riding through deserts, eating exotic food, seeing the architecture of ancient cities and lost civilizations. At night, he explored a different world, one of sensuality and pleasure in the arms of a beautiful, uninhibited, incredibly responsive lover.

Having done the same things with other women in the past, he wasn't sure just how it was different with Celia Davenport, but it was. His intense desire for her was disturbing, but he seemed unable to control it.

Even more disturbing was the undeniable conviction that even if the Sultan decreed he wished to keep his lovely hostage, Robert would not be able to leave her behind. How to secure her freedom in case she wasn't given to his care was indeed a dilemma.

Ali broke into his thoughts as they rode through the massive gates into the teeming streets of the city, the palace a vast façade in the center. "I am sorry that you will not be able to dine with us tonight. I explained to my father that the French Consul will be there and since your countries are at war, you do not feel comfortable sharing your meal with a sworn enemy."

"He understands and is not insulted?"

"If there is one thing my people understand, it is how to hate their enemies. Look at it this way," Ali chuckled, "if you take your meal in your quarters, it will give you more time with the duke's enchanting daughter."

"Actually," Robert murmured, "that had occurred to me. I have already requested she be brought early so we can dine together."

"You wish to have dinner with her?"

"Don't look so surprised. She is charming, and there are things about her I admire besides her undeniably glorious body. I want to know her in more than just a carnal sense."

His companion gave a small snort of derision. "You are a romantic fool, Robert. What is there to know about any woman except the measure of pleasure she can give you in bed?"

"Where I come from, Ali, some men marry for love," Robert pointed out. He added dryly, "Not that I ever pictured that for myself, for quite honestly, I have always been a bit dubious over the existence of that elusive emotion."

“This is a more serious affliction than I thought.” Ali looked almost comically alarmed. “I hope you realize you just mentioned love and marriage in the same sentence.”

Bloody hell, he had.

* * * *

Lela’s hands were skillful as she massaged the scented oil onto Celia’s back, the room smelling of jasmine and lilies. With efficient deft fingers, the older woman tilted the bottle and spread the thin substance lightly, rubbing the small of her back, going lower and doing the same thing to her buttocks, spreading her cheeks apart to cover every rounded curve, even the cleft and the delicate opening of her anus. The same ministrations were given to each leg, her thighs kneaded, and then her calves, ankles, and the bottom of her feet.

Now used to the procedure, Celia no longer felt mortified and degraded to be touched in such a way, instead, she found she now enjoyed the skillful, practiced massage.

Each evening she was prepared in the same way, bathed, shaved, oiled and perfumed. Her hair was washed and rinsed in scented water, her long tresses carefully dried and combed. Though it was clear that Lela’s high position in this part of the palace household meant she could regulate the duty to someone else, she always did it herself for which Celia was grateful. Modesty had no place in a harem, but if she had to be touched, she’d rather it be Lela. The two of them had actually come to a sort of cautious friendship. The older woman felt obvious pride in the way the Englishman desired Celia and used her body, and since pleasing the Earl meant the Sultan was pleased, they existed in accord.

“Roll over, pretty one.”

Prone on the table used for this process, Celia obligingly shifted to her back.

Dribbling the oil over her chest, the older woman began to smooth it over the curves of her breasts. "Such glorious womanly globes," she praised, her fingers working, "so large, yet young and firm. Your lord admires these," she lifted one lightly as she massaged the underside, "very much. He cannot keep his hands or mouth from them."

"He makes me very aware I am a woman," Celia admitted.

"And he uses every part of your body for his pleasure." Tell me," Lela's eyes held open curiosity, "was it truly enjoyable when he impaled your other opening with his finger?"

"Everything he does to me is enjoyable," she admitted honestly. No longer quite as worried about punishment for her inquisitiveness, Celia asked cautiously, "Why do you watch us?"

"It is my duty to make sure our honored guest is well-satisfied. Even now, if you in some way displeased him, you would be replaced instantly by someone more cooperative. I hope you understand this. I am not always the one who watches, I must sleep, but I am told everything."

"Yes," Celia assured her hastily. "I understand."

Dressed in her usual silk robes, Lela raised her dark brows and smiled. "It does not pain you much to give yourself to the Infidel lord, does it pretty one? I hear your screams of fulfillment each night and am glad you have found someone so skillful and well-endowed. He is a rare man, his male lance of an impressive size. He is tireless too, taking you over and over, filling your passage with his seed. You come back here each morning so full of the fluids of life it weeps between your legs."

It was hard to forget the way it felt as Robert climaxed inside her, and the warmth strength of his arms. Lela laughed, her hands still gliding over her breasts. "See how you ready yourself just thinking of him? Your nipples, they are so pink and tight as your

breasts swell with desire. You were made for the act of love, child.”

He had told her the same thing, and perhaps it was true. There wasn't much doubt that she reveled in what Robert St. Claire did to her body. Though she tried not to think too much about it, she had so much time on her hands that she couldn't help but dwell on the complications that lay ahead. If Lord Grayson did manage to gain her freedom, it was going to be difficult to return to her old life. She was no longer the innocent young woman that had once been the rage of the London Season. Most courtesans, she suspected wryly, hadn't done the things she had done.

Half of the time she wished she could go back and change the past, to never have begged her father to let her take the trip to Italy to visit her aunt. It was there she had been abducted from her room one night, after the slave traders who kidnapped her had noticed her at a local fair, her bright hair valuable, one of them told her as she begged in frightened horror to be released.

The other half of the time, she wondered if she would have ever known such wanton, delicious delight if fate hadn't tampered with her life.

Lela moved to her stomach, spreading the oil, making sure she was smooth and softly scented. Her inner thighs and the rest of her legs followed. Because she was so used to it, Celia didn't even blink when another oil was produced, first applied to her nipples to make them slightly shiny and soft, then to her labia for the same purpose. Opening her legs without protest, she let Lela rub it over the soft lips of her cleft.

“He wishes you to join him for his evening meal,” Lela announced, stepping back. She frowned, “It is unusual, but then again, you are unusual together, so hungry for each other.”

Surprised but delighted, for the utter boredom of her confinement was the worst part, she sat up on the table. “Tonight?”

“Yes. You must,” Lela warned, “not forget you are to not talk of your past life. You are a servant in the great house of the Sultan, this is your existence and your purpose now. Let your Infidel lord speak to you if he wishes, but do not annoy him with woman’s chatter.”

Since Robert St. Claire knew who she was anyway, she simply nodded.

“I will come back and dress you in a little while. Perhaps you should lay and rest.”

Once Lela was gone, Celia paced restlessly across the small room, still nude. In the late afternoon the sun hit the high windows and the room often became uncomfortably warm so it had become her habit to not bother with putting on her robe. That was another thing, she realized with cynical amusement, she was used to being naked most of the day and certainly all of the night. In fact, she found she rather liked the way the sheets felt against her bare skin.

If she were honest about it, she liked the way nudity made her instantly available to her insatiable lover.

He wanted to have dinner with her.

And undoubtedly much, much more.

She smiled in anticipation.

* * * *

It was ridiculous to be so impatient, but Robert found himself pacing across the room, waiting for that soft knock that he could swear made his erection begin to swell each time he heard it.

A small table had been set up, surrounded by pillows so they could sit while eating. Instead of being surrounded by hovering servants, he had requested a cold repast of spiced meats, rice, bread, and fruits. A bottle sat next to two glasses and he found he liked the implicit symbol that presented, that the intimate setting

for himself and the lovely Celia represented a sort of sharing of something other than just intense sexual pleasure.

The soft sound he waited to hear made him halt in his restive movement. "Come in," he bade.

He found he caught his breath as Celia came demurely through the doorway. She was exquisite always, but he had never seen her in anything but the thin silk robe she removed almost the minute she arrived. Tonight her slender form was draped in a clinging gown similar to the ones worn by Lela, and the sight struck him inexplicably with both her delicate femininity and compelling beauty. The soft material was blue, the exact color of her eyes, and her blond hair, usually so spectacularly free and tumbled around her bare shoulders, had been braided with ribbon to match her gown. Around her graceful neck she wore a string of pearls that glowed against the material and her flawless skin.

The door quietly closed behind her and they were alone, though he was sure they were still observed every minute they spent together. "You look lovely," he told her truthfully.

Through the fringe of her lashes, she looked at him. "Thank you, my lord."

"I am pleased you will join me for dinner."

"I am pleased you honored me with your invitation to do so."

He lifted a brow and murmured, "I am also pleased you will join me later to satisfy a different sort of physical need. But first, please, sit and let me pour you a glass of wine."

"If you wish, my lord." She moved gracefully toward the table, seating herself on one of the cushions, her legs to the side, concealed by her long skirts.

He loved the way those slender legs wrapped around him as he moved within her, the flex of her thighs as she protested his withdrawals without words, the tightening of her muscles as he plunged back inside...

If he didn't curb his carnal thoughts, he told himself wryly, they would never make it through the meal. He poured a glass of pale amber liquid for each of them and handed one to her. "This is a local drink and quite potent. One has to get used to it, but I have grown to like it."

Celia took a tentative sip. "It is sweet, but not cloying."

"I had something like this while in Scandinavia," he remarked as he seated himself, watching the way she daintily tasted the beverage. "It is also a heady brew, but then the Nordic people of those countries drink even headier substances. It combats the cold, I understand, and those long dark winters. They are fierce warriors and yet uniquely undemonstrative. I spent a summer on a hillside near a fjord, which is what they call their icy mountain inlets. The scenery was breathtaking and the sun never completely went down."

"Have you traveled widely, my lord?"

"Yes," he admitted. "I return home from time to time to tend to the affairs of my estates, but I wanted to see the world. I haven't spent much time in England lately." *Which is why*, he added silently, *I missed seeing you before. If I had*, he also thought with conviction, *I would never have forgotten it*. Celia Davenport's potent attraction was memorable.

"When I return," he continued, taking a drink from his own glass, "I intend to settle into the life I was meant to live. My wanderlust has been satisfied, I am ready for a tamer existence."

"I am sure you miss your wife."

The statement was said so softly, he almost didn't catch it. Startled, he gazed at her and realized that because of their lack of freedom to discuss anything personal, she literally knew very little about him besides his name. "I'm not married," he replied evenly. "Not yet, that is."

For a long moment they simply looked at each other and he thought he saw a brief shimmer of tears in her eyes before she reached for her glass of wine and took a quick sip.

“I hope you are hungry. Please, let us eat.”

As they shared the meal, Robert tried to keep the conversation directed to subjects she could actually discuss, revealing as much as possible about himself in case there were any other unanswered questions she might have but could not ask. It was frustrating to not actually be able to speak with her freely and he sensed the same underlying emotion under her subservient manner. She’d been warned again, he guessed, to not reveal anything about herself. Obviously, neither Lela or the Sultan knew he was aware of her real identity.

Since the Sultan held her life in his hands, Robert wanted to do nothing to damage his chances for keeping his remarkable gift.

So perhaps it was better if they talked as little as possible and spent their time otherwise occupied.

Hopefully they could talk on the journey back to England.

* * * *

“Would you like more wine?”

The courteous question made Celia glance up. Robert looked at her, the bottle lifted, one dark brow winged upward. He was devastatingly handsome in typical English dress, a loose white shirt casually open at the neck, dark breeches, and polished Hessians. His thick hair, usually loose around his shoulders when she saw him, was caught back in a queue that emphasized the fine bone structure of his face.

She shook her head. “I am very satisfied, my lord.”

“Really? I’m not.” His laugh was low. “Well,” he said meaningfully, “I have had enough to eat, but I am not yet...satisfied.”

How she could still blush after all the nights they had spent together, she wasn't certain, but she still felt heat flood into her face his suggestive words.

Between her legs, a different kind of heat pooled.

Perhaps the worst thing was that he knew what kind of effect he had on her. His smile was completely male, purely full of sexual assurance. "Come, let's go to bed. Let me undress you."

To bed. Of course. After all, that was why she was there. It was easy to forget when under the influence of his charming attempt to make it seem like their relationship was something more than master and slave. Resentment rose, vying with arousal, but it wasn't necessarily directed at him, but at their untenable circumstances. Back in England, if he had wished to court her, things would have been entirely different. There would have been flowers, soft words, and romantic moonlit waltzes...she would have fallen in love with him for all the right reasons, his courtesy, intelligence, and that devastatingly attractive smile.

But she was not in England, and he had no need to court her. In fact, quite the opposite. As much as she had enjoyed their intimate dinner, in retrospect it had been a bad idea for it brought home sharply the fact she was a prisoner, a sex slave sent to service him in any way he desired. She had no idea if he could waltz gracefully, or what flowers he might select to send to her, but she did know exactly how to lift her hips so his cock slid deeply inside her, she thought sardonically, and what positions he enjoyed the most as they made love. If she didn't know the other part of him, the polished, cultured courtier, at least she would enjoy what part she could have.

"Celia?"

She rose at that command, standing still as he untied the sash at her waist and let it slip loose, his long fingers unwinding the drapery of her gown, the material sliding into a pile at her feet as he pushed it away. She was naked underneath and she could feel

the traitorous tightening of her breasts as he stood there, gazing at her. Very carefully, he lifted the string of pearls from around her neck and set them aside.

“Now,” he said softly, “you undress me.”

With strained obedience considering the turmoil of her emotions, she reached for the fastenings of shirt, undoing them one by one, revealing his broad chest. Tugging it from his breeches, she eased it off his shoulders and discarded it. He stood, unmoving as she undid his breeches, letting his erection spring free. It was swollen and huge, and Celia could see a bead of pearly semen on the pulsing crest, oozing from the hole at the very tip.

“Touch it,” he ordered, his silver gaze heavy.

For a fraction of a moment, she hesitated. As many times as he had put his penis inside her, she had never touched it with her hand. Tentatively she wrapped her fingers around the rigid length of it, feeling the throb and power of it with surprise, the hard flesh alive and hot in her palm. It felt smooth as she ran her fingers down the long length, yet hard too, like a silk cloth over rock. At the base, his sacs were pulled upward by his arousal, heavy and full, surrounded by a nest of dark pubic hair. Emboldened by the glass of wine she had drunk, Celia cupped them in her hand, rewarded when Robert’s breath went out in a hiss.

“Does that feel good, my lord?” she asked a little breathlessly.

“Yes, though if a man were ever vulnerable, it would be when his balls were in the care of someone else. They are the most sensitive part of my body.” His voice was just a little uneven.

“They feel tight and full.” She tested the weight of each one, learning the size and shape by exploring them with her fingers.

“Not for long, I predict. Here, let me finish this.” He sat down on the bed and jerked off his boots, and then stepped out of his breeches. With a lift of his hand he beckoned her, and she went, her body already feeling warm with expectation, her breasts full now, her cleft dampening.

Robert lay on his back, the rampant cock she had just touched high and rigid. "Take it in your mouth," he told her in a low whisper. "Lick and suck it the way I pleasure you with my tongue between your legs."

Next to him, she could feel her eyes widen and he laughed thickly. "You do not have to attempt to swallow the whole thing. Take it down your throat as far as you can without choking."

If it pleased him half as much as it pleased her when his mouth was between her legs, then she wanted to do it. Celia shifted to her knees. She bent over and licked the shiny tip first, tasting the salty wetness there.

A low gasp escaped his lips, his shaft jerking at even that small touch. Pleased at his reaction, she licked it again and then slowly took him in her mouth, running her tongue over the hot crest, tasting as more fluid seeped out. With gentle suction, she eased his cock farther into her mouth and heard him make another sound, a small groan.

It was a heady sensation of power. She pleased him, yes, but it was usually because he used her body for his own satisfaction. He always dominated the sex play, he was never the object to be touched and seduced; he was the seducer.

She began to move up and down, alternately sucking and licking, her hands braced on the bed. His erection, already enormous, grew as she slid it in and out of her mouth, and the sound of ragged breathing filled the room. Bent over him, she felt his hand on the curve of her bare bottom, exposed as she knelt there, caressing up and down as she moved.

"God," he whispered, "that is so good."

She moved down again, as far she could, the tip against the back of her throat. His fingers moved too, finding her sex from behind, exploring her opening, then pushing inside. He followed her rhythm, withdrawing when she slid upwards and penetrating as she took his shaft deep in her mouth again, so that she began to

move faster as her own need escalated, up and down, his invading fingers sliding in and out of her passage in sync.

Suddenly she felt him tense, sliding his fingers from her body. “Stop, I’m coming.” he said raggedly, and with the swiftness of urgency, he moved, flipping her on to her back, pushing her legs apart roughly as he climbed between them. His entrance was forceful and he drove into her passage, pressing impossibly deep, his eyes shut as he gave a muffled cry and exploded. The gush inside her was hot and fierce, the muscles of his arms defined and tense as he held himself above her.

When he eased out of her body a few moments later, Celia could see he still breathed heavily. On his back, he said in a voice laced with humor, “I have left you unsatisfied, my sweet, and I apologize, but it will take me a few minutes to recover from the ...er...exceptional vigor of *that* orgasm. You have a very talented mouth.”

She *was* unsatisfied and needy, aroused from the caress of his fingers and the feel of him in her body. “You always please me, my lord,” she said dutifully.

“These tell me otherwise.” He reached out a hand and cupped one of her tight breasts. You need relief. Let’s see if your hands are as talented as your tongue. Here, I think you might be surprised how much pleasure you can give yourself.”

He took her hand and placed it between her legs. Celia could feel her wetness and the slick semen on her exposed flesh. A little uncomfortable and not certain what to do, she just laid there. “I can wait for you, my lord.”

“I want to watch you as you pleasure yourself,” he whispered with a wickedly handsome grin, one dark brow raised. “Now, just rub with your fingers, it will feel good and you will discover just where to touch.”

She did as she was told. Lela’s warning about obedience aside, his sexual tutelage had always pleased her. Almost to her surprise,

he was correct; as she began to caress her cleft, her fingers sliding between the moist folds, she felt a rising excitement unfurl in the pit of her stomach. Her skin there was very soft, like silk. She probed at the opening into her body, sliding her finger inside, feeling her walls clench at the penetration. Less and less aware of his heavy-lidded observation, she explored her own body, discovering the bud he had told her existed, feeling it begin to distend and grow as she circled it faster and faster. Her body grew tense, straining for release, and she arched suddenly at that wondrous peak, hanging there, her fingers drenched instantly with orgasmic fluids, her womb pulsing in time with her heart.

As she lay, replete, her legs still sprawled open in sexual abandon, she felt Robert take her hand, kissing her fingers, lightly licking them. "Don't think, my sweet Celia, you don't still need me."

She laughed weakly. "I will always need you, my lord."

"Always," he growled, playfully biting the tip of one limp finger. "Is that a pledge?"

"Yes," she answered in a tone suddenly hushed.

"I am very glad to hear it, for you are special to me also."

The tenderness she saw in his eyes both reassured and alarmed her. "You're leaving soon, aren't you," she guessed, completely uncaring if anyone else heard her or not. The idea of punishment suddenly meant nothing. Her throat felt hot and tight. "Robert...please...when?"

"Tomorrow is my last day here. Ali and I are journeying to see the ruins of an ancient city, once completely buried in the sand. We will camp there and ride back in the afternoon. My ship sails at sunset. Let me correct that, *our* ship sails at sunset."

It was clear that Robert hoped the Sultan would let him take her with him. But since he had not told her it was a certainty, it was apparent that he was unsure if it would actually happen.

“This could be our last night,” she whispered, unwanted tears filling her eyes.

She opened her arms and Robert came to her, taking her in his arms, kissing her damp cheeks, then her mouth, over and over again until all she could feel was the passion shimmering between them. When he entered her body she gloried in the feel of his strength, his desire, her legs opening wider, wanting him as deep as possible, lifting her hips to his measured thrusts. She climaxed first, drowning in a sea of pleasure, feeling a second burst of physical bliss when he stiffened and ejaculated hard and hot inside her.

It couldn't be possible, she thought afterwards, still cradled gently in his arms, that she would never see him again, never feel his touch. When he moved to withdraw, she kept him there, imploring hands on his firm buttocks. And eventually, when she could feel him hardening again, stretching her vaginal passage with his swelling need and size, she felt an almost feverish need build and burst, her response unrestrained and wild.

Robert seemed to share the same burning urgency in the hours that followed, taking her time and again, kissing her softly as he regained his strength, caressing her breasts, the swollen folds wet folds between her legs, his roving hands knowing all of her body, exploring every inch of skin. He whispered words in her ear as he made love to her, telling her how her beauty entranced him, how he had never felt such passion for a woman.

The sun was coming up when Celia finally lapsed into sleep, her body sated and her heart heavy.

Chapter 6

Robert waited, trying to not look expectant and tense, though that was certainly how he felt. It had been difficult to judge the proper time to make his request. He certainly hoped he hadn't made a tactical error in waiting so long for a formal audience, but he was ready to depart and the ship would sail in just a few hours.

The Sultan spoke softly, his dark eyes unreadable. The men around him nodded in agreement, but then again, it seemed they always did.

Not well-versed enough in the local dialect to understand, Robert glanced at Ali. His friend looked bland, translating obligingly, "My father says he is already aware of your desire to keep the English girl."

"He is?"

"Oh yes."

"And?"

The Sultan murmured something else, idly lifting his hand. His heavy brows twitched slightly.

Ali cleared his throat. "He also says that he has never been so importuned on such a trivial matter as one insignificant female slave and it is beginning to annoy him. It seems not only have I expressed my opinion that he should gift the girl to your care, the woman Lela, who once was his favorite, came to him and demanded the same thing. His ministers also, they concur that it would best if you took her when you left."

"Are women allowed to demand?" Robert inquired with a hint of humor, not certain if the tone of the conversation was in his

favor or not. He knew that Celia and Lela were fond of each other in a guarded sort of way, as much as a warder and prisoner ever could be.

“No, they are not...but, the truth is, Lela is a little more favored than his other women and apparently she feels strongly on this matter.” Ali’s mouth quirked in resigned amusement.

Seated on a small dais, the Sultan spoke again.

“He says that his ministers are fools, and that I am soft-hearted when it comes to Infidels,” Ali informed Robert stoically.

A twist of sharp pain clenched in his stomach. *Please God*, he prayed, *don’t sentence Celia to a life of confinement and slavery*. He cleared his throat with effort. “Tell him I have never been given a gift I value as much as the one he gave me when I arrived here.”

Ali spoke quickly, the melodic words flowing. His father simply looked impassive, nodding his head as he responded. Ali chuckled. “He just said that you are also soft-hearted and it is a weakness to be so attached to one woman. But he also understands that your race is inferior and believes you cannot help it, so he grants you the girl. You may take her.”

Robert grinned then, rising from his seat in relief and bowing. “Tell me he honors me and I will always remember the hours I spent in his great house.”

The Sultan lifted his graying brows, glancing at his son and speaking rapidly.

“What did he say?” Robert asked, hearing Ali’s answering laughter.

“He said that you are apparently a stallion among men, and that your English woman might look pale but is by all accounts a fiery mare that screams when you mount her. He wants to know if these tales are true.”

“Tell him” Robert said serenely, “that we mate as fiercely as the wild horses in the desert and her passion is like a summer wind, hot and relentless.”

Ali laughed again. "I will tell him what you said." Then he added with an audible sigh, "You are in trouble, my friend. I tried to warn you."

"I know," Robert agreed, "but at least it is trouble of the most enjoyable kind."

* * * *

As she gazed at the small gems in her hand, Celia wished should feel more pleasure in their iridescent shine and natural beauty.

"So many pearls for one night," Lela said with unmistakable triumph. "All he could do was ride between your legs."

Beyond trying to control her restless anxiety, Celia turned away to conceal the tears gathering on her lashes. A painful swallow hurt her throat and she said in despair, "He is leaving."

"But he wishes to take you with him, pretty one. I spoke to the Sultan myself on your behalf. I think he will allow it."

Celia blinked and whirled around. "You spoke to him?"

Lela's smile was almost wistful, her dark eyes steady. "It is more than desire the English lord feels for you, child. I see him touch you when you sleep, running his fingers through your beautiful hair, stroking your cheek. He whispers to you, words I cannot catch, so quietly, with such tenderness. The way he kisses your mouth and holds you gently in his arms...yes, there is a great passion between you, but there is also something else. He could simply take his pleasure in you and be done, but he makes love to you. Your handsome lord cannot hide his true emotions." She added softly, "Nor can you hide the way you give so freely, so willingly. You also feel that same tenderness that happens sometimes between a man and woman, or you would never submit so willingly. He is your lover, but I sense you also love him."

There in the small room that might be her prison for life, Celia wondered if it might be true. It was difficult to say—considering the fact that they had never been able to speak freely to each other and their only contact had been in the bedroom. Was it even possible for two people to fall in love under such circumstances? Certainly her feelings for Robert St. Claire were confused, but there was no doubt—whether her freedom hung in the balance or not—she was desolate at the thought of never seeing him again.

A soft knock at the door interrupted her thoughts and Lela glided in her graceful way to answer it, speaking in low tones to a young servant girl. When she turned around, she smiled even wider. “I am to dress you. Your departure is in less than an hour.”

Relief made her knees weak and Celia took a steadying breath. “Thank God.”

“Praise Allah and the greatness of your master, the Sultan,” Lela corrected severely. She then laughed. “I wonder if he decided to let you go because he was going to have send divers out for more pearls, pretty one?”

Chapter 7

England, 1809

Robert stood at the window and watched the fine misting rain streak down the panes, the garden outside verdant and green. It was good to be home, he thought absently, but he wished he could settle in. If he considered for a moment the pile of correspondence on his desk, he most certainly would not be standing there, brooding.

The trouble was simple. The daughter of the Duke of Rushton was back in the carefully chaperoned and guarded care of her powerful family.

And no longer his.

They had sailed first to Italy, where arrangements were made immediately by Celia's aunt for her return trip to England. That poor woman, having suffered the brunt of the repercussions of her niece's abduction, had traveled back with them herself, as if delivering to her brother, the duke, his beloved child might absolve what had happened. Robert had sailed on the same ship, but had not seen Celia often. She got desperately seasick, she had told him apologetically as they had left the palace, a fact she had discovered on her journey over. Attired in the blue dress he admired so much, veiled and slender, she might have been a native woman of Ali's country, drawing no attention as they boarded the ship.

She hadn't lied either, he remembered wryly, she had been sick every inch of the way to the Italian coast, but he did manage to at speak with her a little bit, discovering how she came to be

captured, that the trip to Italy had been a gift from her father, something she had always longed to do. The duke hadn't wanted her to go, she admitted, preferring she accept one of the many offers for her hand following her debut into society. Robert had wanted to ask what exactly she was going to tell her family, but she had looked so ill and pale lying in the tiny bunk of her cabin, that he hated to force on her the stark realities of what might lie ahead. Instead, he just made sure she was well-cared for by the woman he had hired as a maid to accompany them, and left her to her misery.

Her aunt had tended to her on the ship back to England, occasionally up on deck for fresh air, where each time they encountered each other she would again thank him profusely, with tears in her eyes, for rescuing her niece. He had glossed over the details of what actually happened and simply said he had been visiting the palace and heard there was an English girl there, and since he was a friend of the prince, the Sultan had let her go with him.

Not precisely the truth, but the truth would make Celia's stout, matronly aunt faint dead away. Besides, he left it up to Celia whether she would inform her father of her lost virginity or not. He wasn't sure how she would feel when she looked back and understood that though neither of them had much choice, he had certainly overstepped the bounds of what was necessary to free her and liberally exercised his intense desire for her lovely body.

He missed her, he thought morosely, staring at the water dripping from the yews. The entire thing felt like some sort of colorful fantasy. Not even he was sure what had been real between them. Yes, they were both young, given freedom from censure and encouraged to explore their sensuality in a remote exotic place, so it was perhaps not surprising they had taken such pleasure in each other's arms.

But had they fallen in love?

“Sir, this came for you and it is urgent, I am told. The messenger waits for your response.”

Startled out of his reverie, he turned toward the open door of his study. Robert saw a young footman there, an envelope in his hand. Thanking him, Robert scanned it with resignation. He was surprised he hadn't been summoned by Rushton already, he mused cynically, though he had already received a formal missive, thanking him deeply for his part in rescuing his daughter. The duke had obliquely expressed not only his gratitude, but his hope that as a gentleman, Robert wouldn't dream of disclosing the truth to anyone.

The truth. If the duke knew the truth, he would want his head.

He crossed to his desk and penned an answer, accepting the invitation.

* * * *

Celia retched into the basin by the side of her bed, eyes watering, before she fell back limply against the pillows. It was a terrible way to start each day, but luckily, it did get better and she found that by noon, she was actually hungry.

On the ship, she had thought it was just the motion, which her stomach did not care for at all. Now that she was home, it seemed quite obvious it was a completely different condition than seasickness afflicting her.

Was it any wonder that she was pregnant, she mused amid the luxurious sheets of her own bed, her room familiar and comforting. Why she hadn't ever pondered that possibility was a sign of her coddled upbringing, and it had been her own father, so obviously uncomfortable, who had come to her just the day before and said her maid confided to him her continued morning illness. He had asked as delicately as possible if there was any chance of a coming child.

Considering the length of the rope of creamy pearls now resting in the bottom drawer of her jewelry chest, the possibilities of conception were many. She had admitted there was, but not said more, feeling a little guilty at the stricken look on his face.

She would not involve Robert, she vowed fiercely to herself. Whatever had been between them, it wasn't as if he had deliberately seduced her. What he had done was choose the only path to liberate her from a life she didn't want to contemplate, in the process introducing her with wicked skill and infinite tenderness to the carnal experiences possible between a man and a woman.

If her father knew that, he would demand Lord Grayson marry her. If Lela was right, and Robert did have feelings for her; that was one thing. But for all she knew he had no wish to marry, no desire for children, and perhaps he had just been swept along as she was, with little choice but to enjoy their nights and hope for her freedom.

The door to her bedroom opened and her maid came in carrying a tray with a pot of tea and dry toast. "Good morning, my lady."

With the covers to her chin, Celia cleared her throat against the sour taste in her mouth. "Good morning."

Eyeing the full basin, the young girl suggested tentatively, "Let me pour you some hot tea, it will help with your upset, my lady."

That might take more than tea, Celia thought with a glimmer of amusement. She wasn't sure just why she wasn't more upset about her current predicament, but she wasn't. In fact, a certain wonder at the idea that a life grew inside her was all she felt. "Thank you," she said as she accepted the steaming cup, resigning herself to the sidelong look of curiosity. Since no one knew she'd been abducted, sold into slavery, and then rescued by a handsome lord, she guessed the servants thought she had been seduced by some dashing Italian boy and had come home carrying his child.

With a sigh for the inevitable scandal, she sipped her tea. So much for being the most sought after young woman in London with rich, titled young men kneeling at her feet, offering marriage.

In light of possible lifelong captivity in a foreign land, never seeing her family again—and never seeing Robert again—it seemed a small catastrophe.

Robert. She pensively wondered where he was, what he was doing.

She missed him. At night, she ached for him, she found, her awakened sensuality leaving her bereft and unsatisfied.

* * * *

The Duke of Rushton looked more than a little unhappy. Robert accepted a glass of brandy though it wasn't quite noon yet, and pondered darkly what subject required such strong spirits to discuss.

Had Celia told her father the truth?

No, he decided, taking a sip from his glass, if so, he doubted Rushton would be willing share a drink with him.

The duke's study was huge, paneled in gleaming oak, the walls filled with bookshelves, the desk magnificent and certainly not piled with the load of paperwork on his own desk. Instead of sitting, the duke paced restlessly, the glass in his hand going abruptly to his mouth now and again. In spite of the fact it was late summer, a small fire sputtered in the hearth against the damp, the only sound in the room. "I hope," Celia's father began, "that you received my note of thanks. It's little enough...how does a man thank someone for giving him back his daughter?"

The duke obviously did *not* know.

Very neutrally, Robert said, "It was not the easiest situation."

"No," Rushton agreed, his face dark and strained. He was tall and had a heavy head of graying hair, his face craggy rather than

delicate like his daughter's lovely features. "That's why I asked you to meet with me...I ...well, I suppose I need your help again. It seems damnable of me to ask, but I am so completely out of my depth I have no idea what else to do. Celia's mother," he added thickly, "died when she was twelve. She is the light of my life."

"My help...how?" Robert asked warily.

"Your father was a good friend of mine."

The oblique dodging of his question was not very reassuring. "Yes," Robert agreed. From his seat in a chair by the desk, he watched the other man's jerky movements, the duke's unsettled state showing in the set of his mouth and the muscle twitching in his cheek.

"With that in mind, and the fact that I have watched you grow into a fine young man, I am going to trust you to keep this conversation and whatever else you know of my daughter's ordeal to yourself."

The man was distraught, Robert reminded himself, and took a moment before he said evenly, "If I had not had Lady Celia's best interests at heart, she would not be here now."

The duke stopped by his desk, suddenly looking utterly weary. "I'm sorry, I did not mean to question your honor, Grayson. I suppose I am so worried about her that I spoke without thinking." On the inhale of an audible breath, he asked flatly, "I need to know what happened to her there."

"Sir?" Wondering exactly how to answer such a question, Robert took a drink from his glass. After a moment, he asked quietly, "What did she tell you happened?"

"Nothing." The duke sighed. "All she will say is that she was taken and sold, kept in a harem until you discovered she was there and used your influence to have her released. Then you took her back to Italy and returned her to the care of my sister, who brought her straight home."

“That is an encapsulated version, I am sure, but accurate as far as I know.”

“Why then,” Celia’s father demanded, “does she suddenly only sleep...without clothes?” He choked on the words as they sputtered out. “Her maid actually came to me and said so. What’s more, she denies being ill-treated during this...catastrophe, but instead seems to actually regard the whole experience as not the ruin of her life but an adventure.”

“Ali’s father, the Sultan, is not a cruel man,” Robert ventured, a little distracted by the duke’s declaration that she still chose to sleep nude. The memory of her soft willing body in his arms haunted his nights. “Their culture is just very different.”

“I cannot understand it. She returns home after being violated and held captive and she is not in the least concerned with her future.”

Despite his resolve to stay expressionless, Robert’s eyebrows shot up. “Violated? She said that?”

“Not precisely, but she’s with child, she doesn’t deny it,” Rushton said hoarsely. “My own daughter was defiled and impregnated by some barbaric despot who paid for her body. Dear God, I cannot think of what she went through, much less understand how to deal with this.”

Celia carried his child? Robert had considered this...knowing, of course, it was possible—more than possible if you counted the amount of times they engaged in the act that often resulted in pregnancy—and he had wondered how she would feel if it actually happened.

He was going to be a father, he thought with surprising joy.

“We could marry,” he offered without inflection, “and it would solve the worst of the difficulty.”

That halted the Duke of Rushton in his tracks, his now empty glass dangling from his fingers. His bushy brows elevated incredulously. “What? I asked you here for your opinion, not to

ask another favor. I think you have done enough out of friendship, Grayson. You would consider marrying a ruined young woman carrying another man's child?"

"I have no idea," Robert answered truthfully.

It took a moment to sink in. The older man blinked, his expression changing, darkening. "What are you saying? Christ, are you telling me that ...that..." he sputtered, seemingly unable to spit out the words.

"I am telling you that if Celia is pregnant, there is no doubt of the fact that the child she carries is mine. And I assure you that she was in no way violated."

"Yours?" the duke thundered, then seemed to deflate just as suddenly. Rubbing his face over his hand, he muttered, "What the devil? If I were confused before, I am most certainly so now."

"Then let me explain."

The sound of the soft voice made them both stiffen. Celia stood in the doorway, demure and lovely in a soft dress that gathered around her perfect breasts and fell gracefully to the floor in folds of white fabric. The bodice was embroidered with tiny sprigs of lilacs, her shining golden hair gathered at her nape and twisted into a neat chignon. She looked young, and sweetly pretty.

Robert's heart tightened as he politely got to his feet, his gaze feasting on every feature of her face from her soft inviting lips to her dark blue long-lashed eyes. She did look pale, he decided, and so damned beautiful it hurt almost to look at her.

By God, he'd missed her so much.

With a steady gaze leveled at her father, chin up, she spoke clearly, "Robert had little choice, Father. The Sultan bought me, then offered me to his honored guest as a gift for the duration of his stay. I know it sounds awful, but they think nothing of such an arrangement. I was horrified at what was going to happen to me, only to find that Robert was...not what I expected." Her cheeks tinted softly as she blushed, but her eyes remained steady. "If he

had refused to bed me, it would be assumed I displeased him and I would be punished cruelly. More over, if I *did* please him, he could perhaps take me with him once his visit was over. We both knew this to be my only chance. When I went to his bed each night, I went gladly.”

The duke seemed speechless and turned, groping for the brandy bottle. “I am glad it wasn’t the horrible experience I envisioned for you, but I still say if he were a gentleman, he would not have touched you.” He growled the words, splashing liquid haphazardly into his glass.

“We were watched,” she said simply. “There are some acts you cannot simulate without actually doing them. Sexual intercourse is one of them.”

That frank declaration from his once innocent daughter made the duke drain half the glass at once, his throat working. “Good God,” he choked out. “I’ve heard more than enough.”

“No, I’m not quite finished. Please realize that I will not,” Celia declared with quiet dignity, “force him to marry me, child or no child. He gave me not only this new life inside me, but my life own back. It isn’t fair to demand more.”

The spirit he had always admired was evident in the way she held her body, and the level and unashamed look on her face. Robert drawled, “Who’s forcing anyone?” Then he ordered quietly, “Celia, come here.”

* * * *

The tone of his voice was so familiar, she automatically obeyed the soft-spoken command, walking across the rich carpet of her father’s study. Robert looked very tall, his silver eyes slightly amused, his mouth lifted at one corner. He was incredibly handsome dressed in typical formal English clothes and her heart started beating quicker, her wayward body responding to his

proximity. When she was close enough he clasped her waist, and without regard for her father watching them, kissed her.

It was hardly a chaste gesture of affection. His hot mouth possessed hers, his embrace tightening until she was against his tall, lean body, and her arms went around his neck as she responded with equal fervor.

His taste, his smell...she felt an almost dizzying joy just to be touched by him again.

When he lifted his head, he smiled down at her with that teasing half-curve of his lips she loved and remembered so well. "Now, do you still think I'm being forced? I wish to marry you and am pleased over this coming child."

Her father cleared his throat noisily. "That...well...that settles things then. We'll tell people that you two met on Celia's return voyage from visiting her aunt in Italy, and—"

"It doesn't quite settle things." Shaking her head, she stepped back out of Robert's embrace. "Can Robert and I have a few minutes alone, please? There are a few things we need to discuss before I agree to anything."

Still looking decidedly off-balance, her father frowned. "I hardly think it's appropriate—"

"It's a little late to worry about propriety, isn't it?" she asked pointedly.

He went finally, gruffly saying before he closed the door, "You have fifteen minutes, Grayson."

"Give us a half hour," Celia countered firmly. When he was gone, she went over and locked the door. As she turned back around, she saw that Robert stood there, one brow lifted in question. She prayed that Lela had been right, that the light in his eyes was more than lust. "I meant what I said. Don't think you need to wed me just because of the baby."

He gave her that devastatingly tender smile again. "Well, considering I can't eat, or sleep, or do any of the dozens of things I need to do since our return because all I do is sit and think about you, I think marrying you is in my best interest. My very health is in danger if you refuse me."

"Are you sincere?" Relief made her feel almost weak.

"Absolutely."

"I am the same way," she confessed. "I think about you constantly."

"Do you accept me then, my sweet Celia?"

That tone of voice brought back a thousand memories, memories of blissful pleasure. Her breasts, fuller already because of her pregnancy, began to throb. "On one condition, I accept."

"What is that?"

She walked slowly toward him and said breathlessly, "I need you, Robert...now. I have been wanting, aching for your touch. I am glad you taught me how to bring myself fulfillment but it isn't the same without you inside me."

"Here?" His protest was belied by the sudden sensual heat in his eyes. "Are you crazy, my sweet? Your father is right outside."

"Look at these, they almost hurt." Swiftly unlacing her bodice and chemise, she let her breasts spill out. They did ache for his touch, his mouth. Lifting her skirts, she ran her finger along her bare cleft and stifled a moan. "I'm wet just from being this close to you."

With her skirts above her waist, he could see she was naked from the waist down, and she heard him take in a swift breath.

"I find I can't wear all those confining underclothes anymore," she told him huskily. "Look how...available I am, my lord."

Her sultry words had a predictable effect. She could see the growing bulge between his long legs as he stared at her, his silver gaze fastened on the juncture of her naked thighs.

“Hell, I accept your condition,” he said, sweeping her up and carrying her to rug by the fire. “Jesus, I’m hard already.” He laid her down and unfastened his breeches, freeing his cock. He was right, it was swollen and rigid, and it lengthened further under her heavy-lidded gaze.

Her legs spread open in graphic invitation, Celia felt the familiar thrill of joyous longing, satisfied when he positioned himself between her thighs and pushed inside. Pleasure touched every nerve, the walls of her passage soft and pliant with need as she accepted him. Her body wept with arousal, coating his invading erection as he began to thrust in a rhythm she remembered so well.

“You can’t scream,” he warned thickly, when she moaned out loud.

Would she be able to help it? she wondered hazily, caught in a whirlwind of pleasure. Robert moved between her legs, plunging in and out. When her climax rushed in quickly, she did let out a small shriek, muffled by his mouth covering hers. He followed moments later, burying deep, pumping into her with the wild orgasmic release she remembered so well.

In the aftermath, kissing her softly, he propped himself on his elbows, and grinned. “That was a bit impetuous. I have been waiting to come and see you, trying to give us both enough distance to adjust to our lives here and see how we feel. I guess I shouldn’t have made you wait so long, my sweet.”

Celia lifted her hips slightly, still drifting in blissful contentment. “*I* can tell you how you feel, my lord,” she said with a wickedly teasing smile. “You feel...enormous.”

“Do I?”

“Yes.”

“How do *you* feel?” The question had an underlying serious query that reflected in his grey eyes.

“Happy to see you again.” She reached up and touched his mouth, the lightest caress of a fingertip on his lower lip. “More than I can say.”

He smiled. “I think I’m going to like you pregnant. Your breasts are even larger.”

“I only wish to please you, my Infidel lord,” she said with mock subservience. Then she gazed intently into his silver eyes. “Is this love?” she asked in wonder, her throat thick. “I want you so badly...all the time. I admire your honor, your gentleness, the way you cared for me and rescued me, even though you didn’t know me. You could tease me and protect me even when we were both prisoners of fantastic circumstances.” She blinked against tears that seemed to well so easily. “I think I would have stayed there forever if I had known you would be with me each night.”

“I feel the same confusion, the same need,” he told her, his mouth drifting closer, brushing hers. “And yes, I think love is exactly what it could be.”

Epilogue

London, 1817

“Celia wore the ropes of pearls to our wedding. When one highbrow dowager asked her point blank where she had gotten such lustrous gems, she replied that they’d been given to her, one by one, each a special gift.” Robert St. Claire glanced around the room and added with a slow smile, “And that, gentlemen, is how I met my wife.”

Jonas Maxim was the first to break into a wide grin, clapping his hands in slow deliberate applause. “Grayson, that story exceeded my expectations, I have to say. A wild tale, both daring and inventive!”

“Bravo,” Colin echoed the sentiment, his fair hair catching the muted firelight. “Is it all true?”

“Oh yes,” Robert confirmed with utter conviction.

“I’ve met your countess and she is stunning,” Gavin St. John murmured. “No wonder you were captivated and determined to free her. Any one of us would have gladly done the same.”

Ross Benson lifted his drink lazily to his mouth. “To be sure. Lady Grayson is a rare jewel. Do you think there are more like her out there? I’ve been thinking about a trip to northern Africa. Now you’ve given me incentive. It sounds like an infinitely delightful place.”

“It was,” Robert agreed comfortably. “But now home is what holds my interest. Have I mentioned Celia is expecting again?”

“Are we surprised?” Colin chuckled.

Christian Foster added, “Congratulations, my lord.”

“Thank you.” Lord Grayson looked slightly smug in a purely masculine way.

Jonas glanced at the clock when it began a slow, ponderous chime. “It is late, everyone. I believe this concludes the meeting of the Brothers of the Absinthe Club. It has been a fascinating evening, I am sure we all concur. Until next time?”

They all raised their glasses in agreement.

ARABIAN PEARL

Brothers of the Absinthe Club 1

THE END

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AUTHOR'S BIO

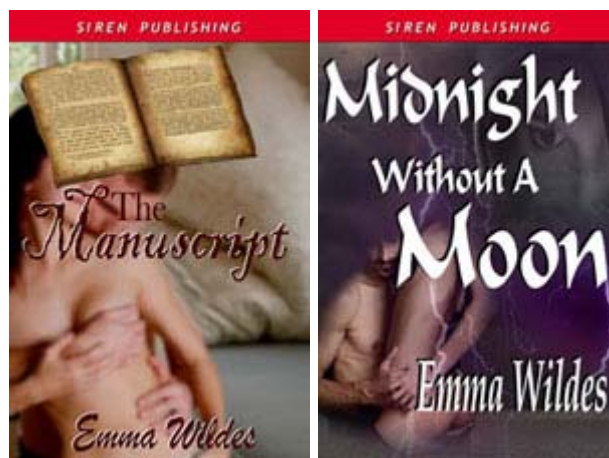


Emma Wildes is the author of numerous erotic novels and short stories. Reading has always been her passion and she finds that vibrant characters with strong personalities have a tendency to draw her straight into the story. History is her passion, and it reflects in her choice of wickedly dashing heroes and willful heroines. She lives in rural Indiana and is working on her next romance. Please stop by and visit at www.emmawildes.com. She would love to hear from you.

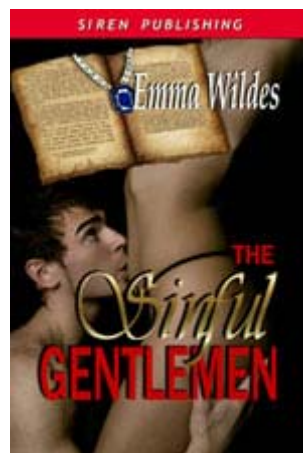
The Sinful Gentlemen Collection

by Emma Wildes

Available in e-book format:



*The Sinful Gentlemen Print Collection contains both
The Manuscript and Midnight Without a Moon*



The Sinful Gentlemen Collection #1

The Manuscript

Claire Fallon is destitute and desperate. Reluctantly, she agrees to become the mistress of the reclusive but deliciously handsome Viscount Ranleigh, even though the man has absolutely no idea she has been hired to warm his bed. Much to her chagrin, another part of her duties involves translating an ancient manuscript that ends up being little more than an apothecary's guide to recipes for sexual adventure...

Justin Howard has made a mistake, and he has paid a price. His wife is a promiscuous tart he can't escape...or can he? After his new assistant arrives to help him with his scientific experiments, he finds Claire not only opens a world of sensuous and uninhibited delights, but a determination to free himself from a situation that he can no longer tolerate.

A scientist and an ingénue prove love matters more than scandal, and it is possible to find some intriguing ideas for passion in *The Manuscript*...

The Sinful Gentlemen Collection #2

Midnight Without a Moon

Trenton Wyatt usually disdains gossip, but when it involves the younger sister of one of his best friends, he is forced to interfere before disaster strikes. Rescuing her from suspicious revenue officers by pretending she is his mistress brings both scandal and the wrath of her family down on his head, and before he knows what's happening, he is forced to wed the very beautiful, very reckless Jessica.

Finally having the attention of the man of her dreams isn't exactly the fantasy Jessica Fairman imagined. For one thing, her arrogant new husband is both controlling and difficult to know...except, of course, sexually. In that way, the infamous rake performs predictably with exquisite skill and tireless passion, filling her nights--and days--with unbelievable pleasure.

An unexpected union binds an aristocratic rogue and a determined young woman together in the dangerous darkness of midnight without a moon...

STORY EXCERPT

THE MANUSCRIPT

The Sinful Gentlemen, Book 1

By Emma Wildes

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It felt a little like coercion and a lot like blackmail when she said bluntly, “The job pays one hundred pounds a week. That is, I will pay you one hundred pounds a week in addition to whatever salary my brother pays you.”

“What?” Claire Fallon blinked, those incredibly lovely eyes incredulous. “A *week*?”

It was a staggering amount to someone almost starving. Money was not an issue and Margot had deliberately chosen an amount so ridiculously high it would not be turned down. “You will have to earn it, of course. Justin will think you are his new assistant, but in truth, what I want is for you to seduce him. I am hiring you, Miss Fallon, to be my brother’s mistress, as well as to assist him in his lab.”

There was a small silence.

Determinedly, Margot went on, “I doubt it will be particularly easy to lure him into your bed since he is still a married man and has an unfortunate sense of honor. However, he is a man and subject to male needs. Now that I have seen you, I think this will work. What my brother needs is a torrid love affair, something to take his mind away from his promiscuous viscountess. Since he rarely leaves our estate, it would be impossible for him to meet someone, so I decided to bring a woman to him. You will be ideal.”

Lounging back after dropping that cannonball, Margot saw a myriad of emotions flit across the delicate features of the young woman sitting in her drawing room, predominantly utter shock. Casually sipping her smooth sherry, she waited, hoping Claire would not get up and walk out in outrage. Her guest seemed to struggle with affront, her eyes dilating, her hand shaking as it gripped her glass with white-knuckled force, but there had to be a measure of interest as well, for she did not get up and leave. Imminent starvation and tedious children were apparently powerful forces, for after several minutes of silence, Miss Fallon said hoarsely, "I cannot find the words to respond to this. Are you serious, Duchess?"

"I don't know what else to do. He simply cannot go on slaving away and feeling so utterly betrayed," Margot explained, a certain frustration coloring her voice. "He is very handsome, and obviously intelligent, but not a man who relentlessly pursues every woman in sight. Particularly not now. You are gifted in both mind and body, and he will respond to you, or so I hope. All I ask is that you try to coax him back to some enjoyment of life. He's not yet thirty. He should not be spending every night alone because of that harlot. She wanted his wealth and his title, but took his trust as well. I am determined to defeat her."

After that impassioned speech, Claire looked a little taken aback, her cheeks pink, her gaze veiled by her lowered lashes.

Persuasively, Margot leaned forward, her empty glass dangling from her fingers. "Think of it, my dear child. One hundred pounds a week to assist my brother in his laboratory and decipher some odd letters, plus the added bonus of being able to give pleasure to an attractive man who, I promise you, will give you pleasure back. I also have no objection to you bringing your young brother to the estate in Sussex, where you can tutor him between your duties and use the army of servants to keep an eye on him otherwise. The house is huge, the grounds extensive, with plenty of room for a

child to play and run. The stables are very fine, as well, since Justin's other passion is riding. Think of it, your young brother can be well-fed, well-cared for and get to enjoy being a small boy."

It was a good strategy on Margot's part. Miss Fallon took a deep struggling breath, a sheen of tears in her glorious eyes. "That's very generous."

"I love *my* brother as you do yours. I may not have to fight to put food in his mouth, but I would do anything to see him smile again."

"I cannot believe," the lovely Claire muttered unevenly, "I would even consider this. My lady, I am not even sure I know *how* to seduce a man."

That small hint of capitulation made Margot suppress a glimmer of triumph. "I could have hired a skilled courtesan, but Justin would not respond to someone like that. Besides, he would catch on quickly enough and be angry with me for meddling. What he will like about you is your education and the ability to meet him on an equal level in some areas. Your extraordinary beauty will not go unnoticed either. It is like the gods dropped you suddenly in front of me as a gift."

That violet gaze changed, suddenly direct, almost challenging. "If your brother is such the perfect gentleman, would he even take to bed an innocent young woman that works for his family? Deflowering a servant is certainly not the actions of the paragon you mention."

"You won't precisely be a servant, Miss Fallon, and you are right. Your virginity is a problem. Since he could never marry you, I don't want him feeling guilty for ruining you once the two of you are lovers. He has to think you are experienced, at least somewhat. You will have to hide the fact you have never been with a man until it is too late."

The girl looked a little curious under her shocked expression. "Can one hide such a thing?"

ADULT EXCERPT
THE MANUSCRIPT

The Sinful Gentlemen, Book 1

By Emma Wildes

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Sighing with satisfaction, she felt him fill her with inexorable hard heat, her passage throbbing and thick already with semen from their previous lovemaking.

Claire set the pace, her hands on his muscular shoulders as she moved up and down, the friction delicious and beguiling. Justin watched her breasts as they trembled and shifted with each motion, his green eyes glittering, his dark lashes shadowing his modeled cheekbones. Her body was so in tune to his that he seemed to sense exactly when to thrust upward slightly, bringing a feverish moan to her lips as the need for release built and grew. When his hand glided from her hip to between her legs, touching the exact spot with precise expertise, she exploded, sinking down deeply and letting out a small scream, her thighs gripping his body just as her inner muscles clenched his cock.

His eyes drifting shut, Justin responded to her wild abandon by flexing suddenly, a groan coming up from his wide chest, his ejaculation drenching the entrance to her womb. Sinking down on to his damp body, Claire lay limply on his chest, their bodies still joined. "I love you, Justin," she breathed.

REVIEWS for The Manuscript

"*The Manuscript* was my first foray into the world of ebooks and I have to admit that I was very pleasantly surprised. Ms. Wildes' language is rich and colorful, fully immersing the reader in the story and period of the day. It must be noted that the love scenes are fully descriptive and intimately detailed. Yet even here, Ms. Wildes' turn of phrase is still very much in keeping with the period of the piece and does not seem out of context.

I thoroughly enjoyed this tale and was even prompted to visit Ms. Wildes' website for a peek at her other stories of daring ladies, devilish gentlemen and good old-fashioned romance. If any of those elements fit your checklist for a good book, then *The Manuscript* is for you. **5 Blue Ribbons**" —
Deborah Kimpton, *Romance Junkies*

"*The Manuscript* is the first in Emma Wildes' The Sinful Gentlemen Collection. In this story, Ms. Wildes has once again has shown her ability to present new variations of romance in all of its infinite forms. The problems of Justin's promiscuous tart wife, Caroline, adds just the right amount of tension to this exciting romance story. Justin and Claire add a wonderful chapter in exciting romance series. The story is very erotic and arousing, and makes Claire and Justin more than just written lovers. I found myself envying Justin and wishing Claire was a real person in my life. The romance between Claire and Justin is filled with steamy passion. Ms. Wildes' writing style is fresh and very enjoyable. The plot and flow of the story makes a wonderful reading experience. Be prepared to feel your passions grow as you read the beautifully written love scenes. **5 Stars/Hot**" —**W.O. Cable, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews***

"Emma Wildes has the unique ability to draw the reader into her stories and make them feel invested in the happiness of her characters because they share so much of themselves. She also creates the most unique storylines that never fail to surprise the reader. Most novellas leave the reader thinking that, had the story been longer, it would have been more enjoyable. That is not the case with Ms. Wildes [in *The Manuscript*] as she takes the opportunity to fill every page with sentiment, and when the story ends, you just can't help but think it was perfect. **5 Stars/Excellent**" —Kerin, *Euro Reviews*

"*The Manuscript* is a lighthearted and sexy tale of a needy, studious man and a woman abandoned by society because she's too pretty. Justin is tempted by her; Claire is intrigued by him. Watching these two dance around their attraction is half the fun of this story! Her work in translating a manuscript on folk remedies and sexual practices only serves as a foil to fan the flames. The villainess of this piece, the gleefully trappy Viscountess Ranleigh, is well-crafted and self-absorbed, and it's a joy to see her receive her just reward. *The Manuscript* is a charming and sultry tale, and is sure to please! **5 Angels!**" —Michelle, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

"*The Manuscript* by Emma Wildes is a delicious read. Justin was adorable. I found myself smiling at his discomfort and I loved how Claire was able to tease him. Claire was unlike any innocent I have read about in a while. She has guts. I don't think I would have been able to seduce Justin.

The Manuscript is a hot, romantic read that instantly held me spellbound. I love how Ms. Wildes threw a plot twist at the end and surprised me. *The Manuscript* is a great addition to my library!" —Talia Ricci, *Joyfully Reviewed*

STORY EXCERPT

MIDNIGHT WITHOUT A MOON

The Sinful Gentlemen, Book 2

By Emma Wildes

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“Well, it took you long enough, my lady.”

The sound of that softly drawled sentence made Jessica stumble, almost plowing into the tall figure that had ominously materialized in front of her. Two strong hands shot out to steady her, and she recoiled, panic flaring through every nerve ending in her body.

Dear God, no!

For a long moment, terror held her immobile before she began to struggle. “Let me go.”

“That’s not likely. Calm down, you reckless little fool. It’s me.”

A second before her foot connected solidly with her assailant’s shin, she registered the familiar deep timbre of the man’s voice, her eyes widening in surprise. His grunt of pain was real enough and his hands tightened on her shoulders through her cloak. Jessica gasped, “My lord, what on earth are you doing here? You frightened me half to death.”

“And you’ve crippled me for it. By the devil, woman, that hurts.”

“What do you expect, looming out of the dark like that and grabbing me!” she exclaimed tartly, her heart still pounding at a rate that made her feel dizzy.

His hold slackened, and in the dim light, Jessica made out the

glint of his gaze and the clean, straight line of an unsmiling mouth. “I think the more appropriate question would be, what on earth are you doing here, Jess?”

It was damning, of course, to be caught out like this, for no respectable young lady had a good reason to wander the cliffs in the middle of a stormy night. Since she couldn’t think of a single believable response, she simply said stonily, “It’s none of your business.”

“I think it is.” Letting her go, Trenton Wyatt, the Earl of Declan, stepped back a pace, his chiseled features washed to bone and angle by a sudden flash of lightning. “My horse is tethered a few paces away. Come on.”

Jessica shook her head, feeling the rising wind tug on her cloak and blow teasing wisps of hair across her face. Above, the branches sighed mournfully. “I’ll get home on my own. It’s just a short way.”

“You aren’t going home, my dear.” His faint smile was a glimmer of white teeth in the shadows.

That kind of statement was high-handed, even for someone as infernally arrogant as Trenton, but there was a certain unsettling conviction in his voice. A stab of unease rippled through her. Jessica didn’t move but stood rooted in the thatch of woods, staring up at him. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that I think you’ve finally outdone yourself, Jess. You aren’t a child any longer, climbing trees and swimming in the cove against your mother’s wishes. This particular escapade is a little more serious. In case you haven’t been informed, smuggling is a crime.”

When she responded after a long heartbeat, her voice shook like the withering leaves overhead. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I think you do. What’s worse, I’m not the only one who has deduced the beautiful female smuggler being whispered about on

this coast just might be the lovely and aloof Lady Jessica Fairman.”

This truly could not be happening. He was wrong. Her reputation was pristine. “What nonsense.”

“Is it?” Harshly, Trenton rasped, “Devil take it, you rash, headstrong wench. Did it ever occur to you that the state of your family finances is not a secret? Servants talk, merchants gossip. It’s the way of the world. When you can suddenly pay your bills and the money has no legitimate source, people begin to wonder. Tell me, my dear. Have you heard the latest rumor? The revenue men have started calling the ringleader of the local smugglers the Golden Angel. They believe she is a French spy, selling secrets to Bonaparte for boatloads of contraband brandy and wine.”

The blood drained from Jessica’s face, and she felt herself go cold.

Relentlessly, he went on, the lash of the wind no worse than the stinging content of his words. “We can count on the possibility they are watching the house as we speak, waiting for you to slink back from your damnable rendezvous.”

“I am not a French spy,” she said hotly, fear making her lose all sense of discretion. “Just the opposite.”

His laugh cracked through the wild night. “Oh, wonderful. Now, I suppose you’re telling me you’ve been spying for us, carrying messages for communication to Wellington? That’s not any better, Jess. If the French realized you’ve been using the smuggling ring to further our cause against their emperor, you’ll be marked a target.”

That had been a possibility all along. She had been just desperate enough to risk it.

One long-fingered hand reached out and snared her wrist, jerking hard. “Look.” Trenton Wyatt, the man she’d known all her life, her brother’s oldest friend, pulled her nearly off her feet, his face thrusting close. “We’re leaving now. You are getting with me

on my horse, and we're riding to Declan Manor. Understand?"

Wildly, she shook her head. "No."

Hands grasped her waist, and suddenly, she found herself swung into a pair of uncompromisingly strong arms. "Yes."

Desperate and frightened, she shoved ineffectually at his broad shoulders. "Trenton, put me down. I have to return home. If I'm not there in the morning, what will people think? Don't be daft. I can't go home with you. If you want to play the rescuing angel, take me home and help me get safely inside."

His expression was dark as he strode out of the woods, his mouth tight and implacable, his hair wind-tossed and unruly. Sure enough, his horse grazed quietly on tufts of grass that grew in haphazard straggles by the cliff. "Sorry, love. If I'm an angel, it is only of the darkest sort."

It was warm in his embrace, and his chest felt strong and secure. Jessica resisted the irrational urge to cling to him. "If I am under suspicion, not going home won't help that situation. Don't you see? You'll simply be labeled my accomplice."

"No, I won't." He promptly swung her onto the back of his horse and then vaulted into the saddle behind her, picking up the reins with competent hands. "I'll be labeled your lover."

ADULT EXCERPT
MIDNIGHT WITHOUT A MOON

The Sinful Gentlemen, Book 2

By Emma Wildes

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**[Scene note: An assassin watches the hero and the heroine
make love.]**

“Trenton,” the breathless whisper came clearly. “Oh...yes.”

The woman was on her back, her voluptuous gleaming body nude, her long hair in riotous waves of shimmering softness around her shoulders. Full ivory breasts quivered as she arched upwards in small, restless movements. Her knees were bent and spread wide open, her dainty feet resting on the mattress. Eyes closed, she gasped and mumbled something, her slender fingers threading through the dark hair of the man lying between her legs, his mouth hungrily eating at the apex between her thighs. The soft wet sounds of his oral ministrations were punctuated by the woman’s rising moans, and when she began to tremble violently, the man grasped her slim hips and cradled her in his large hands, prolonging her orgasm with his mouth on her sex until she went limp and breathlessly begged for him to stop.

In the firelight, his grin gleamed wickedly as he shifted, sliding upward in one smooth movement of his muscular body. Covering the body of the blonde woman, he kissed her with an almost leisurely evident enjoyment at odds with the fully aroused state of

his body, his erection dark against the woman's pale skin.

Watching from the shadows, no longer particularly afraid they would see him, at least if he stayed still and made no noise, Gaston noted the impressive width of the earl's shoulders, and the toned state of his body. From what information he could gather, by all accounts, the earl might be a force to reckon with, deadly with a pistol, athletic and intelligent. He didn't seem like a man who would allow harm to come to his very lovely wife.

Especially when he seemed to so fully enjoy her charms.

"Can you feel me, Jess?" Gaston could hear him ask in a low growl. "I'm so damned hard I can feel my heart beating in my cock. I need to be inside you."

His wife's response seemed to be a choked sigh, her slim arms twining around his neck, her body overtly accepting as the Earl of Declan positioned himself between her thighs and began to penetrate, his hard buttocks flexing as he pushed deep into her body and started to move in the carnal rhythm of sexual intercourse.

For him, Gaston always viewed sex as a necessary part of life, something to be done to relieve the need—like eating or sleeping. He used prostitutes more often as not, as they were simple, the deal a straightforward exchange without emotion. The concept of love and marriage was abstract to him, like understanding the objection of the rest of Europe to his emperor's ambition.

However, this might be a problem, he mused as he continued to watch them couple, finally hearing the countess expire in a small blissful scream, her husband making a low sound of satisfaction as he went rigid against her open legs, his head tilted back and his eyes tightly shut as he climaxed. If he was going to complete his task, Gaston mused, edging back a little, he would need to be able to get the girl alone. Considering he was so noticeable as a Frenchman in a time when England's tensions with his country ran high, he was going to have to plan carefully.

And, he conceded, abandon the idea of catching Jessica Wyatt peacefully asleep in bed, for he somehow doubted after tonight's passionate performance she ever slept alone.

It was an obstacle, he told himself with practicality as he stealthily tread across the balcony and easily swung a leg over the railing. An obstacle he could overcome.

She would die at his hands.

REVIEWS for Midnight Without a Moon

"I couldn't help but become helplessly drawn to *Midnight Without a Moon*. While this is the second in the Sinful Gentlemen Collection series, it is not connected to the previous story and is a stand-alone book. What made this book so invigorating is the intelligent and strong-willed Jessica. She is clever with an intelligent mind and a strong sense of self-worth. Both endearing and believable, she exudes a personality that shines with her glib comments and reasonable choices. Likewise, I greatly enjoyed Trenton. His father was a ruthless rogue and his talents with the ladies became Trenton's talents as well. This leaves a slight undercurrent of coldness to Trenton's personality as he is such a rogue that he doesn't believe love is a possibility. This uncertainty makes you wondering if, or when, he's going to slip up and become the cheater his father was. Trenton's desire to fight the possibility of love drew me to him, along with his gentle yet firm ability to leave Jessica gasping with pleasure. These sex scenes are delicious, being both carnally passionate and delightfully descriptive. The plot has several slight twists, with enough action to keep me engaged by the storyline. There never was a dull moment and I found myself re-reading chapters because of how intense they were. Overall, I greatly enjoyed *Midnight Without a Moon* and will be placing Emma Wildes on my must-read list of authors. **5 Stars/Hot**" —**Francesca, Just Erotic Romance Reviews**

"Trenton Louis Wyatt, the Seventh Earl of Declan, is a wealthy, sophisticated, handsome man with compelling charm. He's also the one man that Jessica wants but never dreams of having. She's been in love with him for as long as she can remember but his wild exploits and reputation as a rake have led her to keep her distance.

Trenton discovers that the lovely and aloof Lady Jessica Fairman is in quite a predicament. When her situation becomes precarious, he has no recourse but to help the youngest sister of his best friend. While his suggestion that she become his mistress is a bit unconventional and highly scandalous, he's convinced that it'll keep her out of prison.

I thoroughly enjoyed *Midnight Without a Moon* and believe that you will too. Trenton's honesty not only made him

endearing but also earnest and trustworthy. The manner in which both Trenton and Jessica came to each other's defenses so soon after their marriage was heartwarming. The historical accuracy of Emma Wildes' work always adds to its allure. Jessica has just enough sass to make this tale entertaining while Trenton is all sexy hot male! The beautiful and romantic writing style that Ms. Wilde's employs makes *Midnight Without a Moon* a charming page-turner. **4.5 Kisses**" —Kerin, *TwoLipsReviews*

"In Trenton Wyatt, we have a hero of the high-calibre we have come to expect from Emma Wildes. He is outwardly a rake, but inwardly a tender-hearted lover and the masterful rescuer of the reckless Jessica. Their journey of discovery together is as enjoyable as the espionage thread that runs within the story and proved to be an excellent platform for introducing the impetuous Jessica. Ms. Wildes' talent for description draws the reader into her stories right along with her characters. No detail is ever overlooked, from the feelings that race through Jessica as she enjoys the first kiss with Trenton to the lavish descriptions of her clothing. In *Midnight Without a Moon*, Ms. Wildes has woven a tale of delightful adventure-both in and out of the bedroom ensuring that she is always a joy to read. **4 Blue Ribbons**" —Deborah, *Romance Junkies*

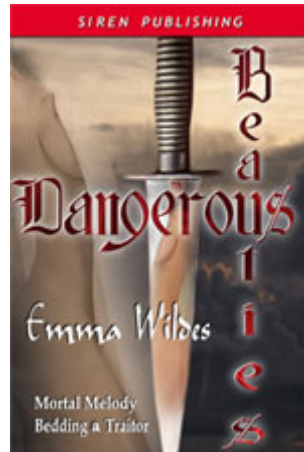
Dangerous Beauties
Collection

by Emma Wildes

Available in e-book format:



Dangerous Beauties Print Collection contains both
Mortal Melody and *Bedding a Traitor*



Dangerous Beauties Collection #1

Mortal Melody

A young woman is sent on a mission to deliver a volatile package to a reputed dark and powerful lord--only she proves to be the deadly one.

Susanna Holt has lost her father, and now finds herself at the mercy of a broodingly handsome and enigmatic man who isn't ordinary in the least. Lord Fairmoor is the very stuff of legend, and she needs him desperately to protect her. The infamous earl does much, much more than just keep her safe, and in his arms, she learns that paradise can exist in the middle of mortal danger...

Dare Weston wants a quiet life where his gift goes unnoticed. But when tempted with the lovely Susanna, he finds his human failings overcome self-preservation, and he is lured by the song of passion, succumbing to that Mortal Melody...

Dangerous Beauties Collection #2

Bedding a Traitor

He's handsome, incredibly brave, a decorated hero...and just might be the treacherous man who betrayed her husband. Stephanie has a score to settle, but exacting the truth has never been so wickedly wondrous. Seducing Colonel Kingsley in the name of justice proves to be her pleasure, and she finds she is more than willing to sacrifice honor if it means spending time in his bed.

The Luscious Lady Lakes, or so she is called by London society, wants something. Just what it is, Daniel Kingsley has yet to discover. Though he knows the beautiful widow's motives are suspect, he is just too captivated to resist the temptation.

Together a damaged hero and a vengeful widow find that sinful passion and incredible pleasure are possible, if you are Bedding a Traitor...

STORY EXCERPT
MORTAL MELODY

Dangerous Beauties, Book 1

By Emma Wildes

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Dare rose from his knees and turned just in time to see the girl sway. She was ashen pale, her knees bucking, but he caught her just before she hit the ground. He managed to lower her without jarring the knife that stuck out of her shoulder like an obscene symbol of evil. Glancing back over his shoulder at the prostrate bodies of her two attackers, he felt a murderous impulse to tug out that knife and slit their ugly throats, though it would have been a pointless gesture as they were both quite dead.

He looked back down. Lying on the leaf-strewn ground, the young woman looked fragile and lovely. A tumble of golden hair framed a pale oval face dominated by long-lashed dark eyes. Wide with pain, her wild gaze seemed to search his for some sort of reassurance. He felt her fear seeping through every pore of his body. The shallow gasps that escaped through her parted lips moved the knife sticking out from her shoulder in macabre little quivers.

“They cannot harm you any longer,” he said gently, eyeing the growing wetness around her wound that soaked her plain, dark dress.

“Are they...dead?” Her slender throat rippled in a hard swallow.

“I’m afraid so.” Kneeling there in the damp grass, a cynical smile twisted Dare’s lips. “It didn’t seem to me there was much

choice, my lady. Despite my polite greeting, they were most unfriendly fellows.”

“Yes.” A small shudder racked her slender form.

He pulled out his linen handkerchief and uttered a silent curse that he had nothing better. One square of cloth was not going to do much to stop her bleeding. As unemotionally as possible, he said, “The knife must come out. I will try to be as gentle as possible, but I fear this will hurt a great deal.”

A weak laugh made her cough. “It already does.”

Dare had never thought of himself as being squeamish in anyway, yet when he lifted his hand to grasp the protruding hilt of the weapon imbedded so deeply into her flesh, he felt a tiny wave of sickness. He was about to cause this delicate, feminine creature a moment of blinding agony. Putting his other hand just below her throat, bracing against her breastbone, he took a deep breath.

“Wait!” Her left hand flew upward and grasped his wrist. Those huge eyes, so lovely and dark, stared upward. She whispered, “Who are you?”

“Fairmoor,” he said just before he pulled it free.

She fainted instantly without even uttering a cry. For a moment he sat back on his heels, holding the dripping knife. Then in revulsion, he tossed it away and pressed the cloth in his hand to the welling wound. The blade had gone to the bone. He’d felt the sickening scrape of it as it came free. She needed attention immediately.

Female undergarments were mostly a huge waste of cloth, he mused wryly as he lifted the young woman’s dark skirts and tore off a strip of material from the bottom of her chemise. He used it to bind the pad of his handkerchief to her shoulder by winding it under her arm and tying it tightly as possible. Already the white square had turned crimson.

The impulse to touch her was strong. He knew her already, every feature of her pale, lovely face and every delectable inch of

her lissome, lush body.

He was like the cat, he thought with somber fascination, so curious and so very foolish. Yet still, he needed to know. Tentatively, he reached out and ran one finger over the porcelain curve of her cold cheek and opened his mind to search for answers.

The image was poised there, waiting. He knew this because of the swiftness of the invasion, of the very violation of his mind. It came, clear as the edge of a sword blade and as bright, a fiery picture frozen as brilliantly as a finely painted portrait. Only the vision was more compelling, the more real, because it was perfect as a treasured memory, every detail burned forever into his consciousness.

Seven figures in a blazing circle, arms lifted in supplication to the wrong gods...

Darkness poured over the scene, as ancient and evil as time itself. Violence, fear, passion, and danger all swarmed in a swirling maelstrom of furious, struggling emotion.

Snatching his hand away, he took a deep steadying breath.

From that one touch, he knew so much more.

ADULT EXCERPT
MORTAL MELODY

Dangerous Beauties, Book 1

By Emma Wildes

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There was a sudden pressure of his palms on her inner thighs, pushing them apart. Susanna flinched, shocked for a second out of the languorous sense of enjoyment invading every nerve-ending. Instinctively, she clamped her legs together. “No.”

“Yes.” The word was barely audible. His mouth wickedly grazed the triangle of hair at the apex of her legs. “Relax and open,” he encouraged. “You are safe with me, Susanna. I need to taste you.”

She *was* safe. She knew it or she wouldn’t be there in his huge bed, giving her body so wantonly. The husky need she heard in his deep voice was reassuring, giving her some measure of power over this enigmatic yet compellingly attractive man. With effort she did as she was bid and let her legs fall apart, and when she felt the first slide of his tongue against her sex, she shivered at the acute pleasure of that intimate, sinful touch. “Oh.”

His warm mouth pressed closer, invading tenderly. His tongue found a spot that sent a lightning bolt of sensation through her body, making her spine arch as her legs fell open even farther. “So sweet,” he murmured against her inner thigh, “like one of Anton’s finest desserts.”

“My lord...” she began in weak protest but stopped when she felt once again the light abrasion of teeth and tongue on her throbbing cleft. His silky hair brushed her trembling thighs. His

hands cupped her buttocks, lifting her higher. His mouth ravaged and wooed her body, making it climb toward an unknown destination.

It was all part of the fantasy, she thought in hazy rapture, tension searing every pore, every muscle, as her wayward body trembled. It could not be real. It was too much, this blissful pleasure from such an audacious and unnatural kiss...

Suddenly her bones seemed to flatten and melt as he pressed his mouth firmly on that pulsing center of pleasure between her open legs and teased with soft, inexorable pressure. Susanna exploded, her hand fisting in the bedclothes. Shock waves of pure physical joy racked her body, washing over her again and again. She screamed out loud, a thin keening wail that carried and echoed in the quiet depths of the darkened room. The world tumbled away, leaving only the dark smile on Lord Fairmoor's face as he lifted his head and watched her abandoned release.

REVIEWS for *Mortal Melody*

"The descriptive language in *Mortal Melody* pulls you into the story so instead of reading it, you feel as if you're experiencing it. Susanna's intelligence and clear-headedness was gratifying during a time period where women often deferred to men and forwent their own independence. Emma Wildes has penned a story that is a heady combination of magic, intrigue, adventure, with a touch of Goth and a heavy dose of carnal sensuality. As *Mortal Melody* unfolds, layer by fascinating layer, the tension escalates until you're driven to find out the truth and unwilling to stop reading until the very last page. Masculine, powerful, yet tender heroes, engaging and personable heroines, warm, sexy love scenes and beautiful imagery characterize Ms. Wildes' stories. *Mortal Melody* possesses all of that and much more. I highly recommend this satisfying read. **5 Kisses**" —Kerin, *Two Lips Reviews*

"*Dangerous Beauties 1: Mortal Melody* introduces some interesting and captivating lead characters, and pulls you along on a wonderfully rewarding journey. Ms. Wildes' writing style is seamless and evokes strong feelings from this fascinating tale. Susanna proves to be a most intrepid female for her times, and her better qualities are highlighted with her interaction with Dare, a most sensual, intriguing, mysterious and sexy character. The build up of sexual tension between Dare and Susanna is most rewarding when they finally get together for the first time, leading all subsequent intimacies a perfect expression for their developing relationship. Susanna revels in her sensual nature with Dare, and this makes their everyday interaction realistic and their intimate moments hot enough that you need a bucket of ice water to keep cool.

Mortal Melody is a spellbinding tale that combines both historical and paranormal elements, with some mystery and magic wrapped around this intriguing and unforgettable story. The characters are captivating, the story absorbing, the dialogue sharp, with cleverly interwoven facts to make it believable, and steaming hot sex that highlights the growing bond between Susanna and Dare. *Mortal Melody* is a marvelous opening for what looks to be a most rewarding series. I'm looking forward to more of Ms. Wildes *Dangerous Beauties* series of books. **5 Stars/Hot**" —Aggie Tsirikas, *Just Erotic*

Romance Reviews

"*Mortal Melody* is the kind of story that really gets you right from the beginning. Although there are things that are unexplained (i.e. Dare's unusual powers), this fast-paced story still makes you want more. You'll be glued to your screen just waiting to discover what will happen next. Although Susanna is young and doesn't realize it herself, she's strong. She willingly faces her fears in order to complete her father's last wishes. Perhaps because of her dire circumstances and the fact that Dare is so charismatic, she willingly submits to his seduction. With a few strange characters and one or two twists, Ms. Wildes will keep your attention right until the end. **4 Stars**" —Trang, ***Ecataromance***

STORY EXCERPT

BEDDING A TRAITOR

Dangerous Beauties, Book 2

By Emma Wildes

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Lady Stephanie Lakes sat quietly and adjusted the skirts of her pale blue watered silk gown with a languid movement, waiting as the man behind the desk frowned over the document in his hand.

Eventually, Sir Phillip Marston looked up and gave her a grim smile. “So you do not think he is the infamous spy, Partisan, my lady.”

She shook her head slightly. “I am not certain, of course, but I as of yet cannot find any evidence to support the suspicion. I also do not think he is the kind of man who would betray his country.”

“This conclusion is based on sharing his bed for a week? I have always thought it might take a bit longer to know the true measure of what lies inside a human being. Keep in mind, our quarry is well-used to deception as well as treachery, my dear.” His tone was dry and Sir Phillip lifted bushy gray brows.

“The concept is not foreign to me.” Having learned a long time ago to school her expression, Stephanie just smiled slightly. “I was with my husband a great deal during his time in Spain, was I not? That is why you recruited me and that is why I tell you that I think Colonel Kingsley is no more and no less than what he seems—a wounded hero of Wellington’s most grueling campaigns come back to England to recover and resume the life of a gentleman.”

“Including acquiring a beautiful aristocratic mistress?” Marston’s face was craggy, his clever eyes very dark under those

heavy brows, and when he smiled, he looked a bit like a wolf ready to pounce on his prey. "As always, your stunning beauty is an asset to our little endeavors, Madame." He tapped her report with a crooked forefinger. "If the whispers are true and Partisan has left Spain and returned to England, there are a few other men who could be suspects for the role of our wily adversary. One is a close acquaintance of your handsome lover, which is convenient for our purposes. It would be suspicious for you to suddenly lose interest, and besides, before I exonerate the Colonel, I wish to have his study thoroughly searched. My orders are to continue to generously use your considerable charms on our heroic suspect and contact me at once if necessary. Also gather whatever information you can on Major Mark Chase."

Not expecting Sir Phillip to be easily convinced, Stephanie merely inclined her head. It was illogical, and she knew it, but being commanded to sleep with Daniel Kingsley eased her guilt over the fact she enjoyed every moment in his arms. "When do you propose the search? I can make sure he is...occupied."

"I am sure you can," Marston said in smooth amusement. "That is why I admire you, my dear Lady Lakes, you are both lovely and resourceful. Tonight will do. My men will wait until the two of you return from the little gathering you are attending at the Houghton's. Once you retire upstairs, his servants will go to bed. Please make sure the Colonel does not leave the bedroom for at least two hours. That should be plenty of time to do the job with infinite care."

Stephanie rose. "Very well."

Outside the dim, small window, the street shimmered in the afternoon heat, carriages lurched past, and street vendors screeched into the sultry air. She would exit the seedy building as she came, in a closed hack used for clandestine meetings such as this, her identity hidden and her destination a public place where she would catch yet another conveyance to take her home.

As she turned to leave, Sir Phillip said coolly, "Tell me, my lady, for I am curious, what made you agree to seducing Kingsley? In the past, though you have charmed and beguiled, you have refused to actually bed any of our subjects. I respected your virtuous convictions, even if they were...problematic for my purposes, because you were still a very valuable agent. Why is this assignment different?"

Though it did not happen often, she flushed slightly. "He is not the kind of man a woman can bat her eyelashes at and bring him to his knees. Flirtation only amuses him. His pursuit was very direct and his objective quite clear. Had I resisted for too long, he would have wondered why I started the game in the first place. Whatever else he proves to be, hero or traitor, Daniel is not a fool."

"I see." Marston's expression was inscrutable. "You do realize the folly of letting your feelings become engaged, I assume."

Recovering her composure, Stephanie elevated a brow. "I lost my husband to a French bullet, Sir Phillip. My life is devoted to bringing Bonaparte to his knees. Falling in love with the Colonel does *not* suit my purposes."

But as she left the dingy little office and walked slowly down the shrouded stifling hallway, she wondered if her plans of indifference had already gone awry.

* * * *

Something wasn't quite right. He could always sense it, like the building tension before a battle. Daniel Kingsley watched the woman sitting across from him in the carriage and registered nothing but her usual serene and unrivaled beauty, and the slight smile on her soft lips as she gazed back with her signature emerald green eyes.

How easy, he thought cynically as they rumbled along the cobbled streets, to be captivated by her striking allure. The male members of the *haute ton* referred to his new mistress behind her back as the Luscious Lady Lakes. Raven-haired, with flawless

ivory skin and those remarkable verdant eyes, she was gorgeous in a way completely different from the popular golden-haired, blue-eyed misses that graced London's ballrooms and soirees. Lush and graceful, her body also took his breath away. Tonight she was stunning in a gown the color of fine claret that showed off the smooth upper swells of her full breasts. He remembered only too well how she felt in his arms, how hotly welcoming and seductive when he moved between her pale thighs...

However, everything about the lady wasn't as it appeared.

"You seem preoccupied this evening, Daniel," Stephanie murmured, one hand lifting to lightly brush away an errant ebony curl that had escaped her coiffure. "Is something wrong?"

"That is odd you should ask," he replied, lounging back and lifting a brow. "I was actually thinking the same about you, my dear."

She looked a little startled, her eyes widening. "Me? No, I assure you. I had a wonderful time at the party, though I do feel we were rather the topic of conversation the entire duration." She made a moue of distaste. "Perhaps we are lucky that most everyone is in the country because of this awful remorseless heat. I loathe people whispering behind my back, but I suppose it is inevitable. Discretion simply does not work when one has servants, does it?"

Recalling their first night of impetuous lovemaking, Daniel remarked dryly, "When one falls asleep from sheer sexual exhaustion and fails to duck out in a gentlemanly fashion before the staff awakens, then I don't think discretion applies. Let's face it, darling, we were fairly caught out by your maid. I could have jumped, stark naked, I suppose, from your bedroom window, but there would still have been the dilemma of how to get home unnoticed."

He knew she was absolutely not promiscuous, in fact, quite the opposite, for she had a reputation as being unattainable. In fact, he had been surprised—pleasantly so—when she asked a friend to

introduce them, and even more so when she proved receptive to his admittedly heated interest. Chagrin over the scandalous public disclosure of their newfound intimate relationship was understandable, he supposed, and it made her all the more attractive.

She lifted an elegant dark brow. "I am glad you fully accept the responsibility for our current notoriety, Colonel."

"The price," he said softly and meaningfully, "is well worth the reward."

Something flickered in her green gaze, a reflection of the same sexual anticipation, perhaps, that he felt for the night ahead. One slim hand slightly adjusted her skirts in a slow movement. "Oh, I see. You feel rewarded when we make love?"

One of the things that so intrigued him about the woman sitting across from him was what he sensed to be a complexity of personality, which separated her from any other lover he had ever bedded. He didn't consider himself a shallow man, but usually, he sought willing women who desired little more than a pleasant sexual interlude. Up until this point in his life, there had been no room for anything other than transient relationships. One did not seek love and permanence when fighting a war. As gallantly as possible, he responded with deliberate flowery flattery, mimicking some of her poetic admirers. "The privilege of being able to kiss your hand is reward enough, my lady. Anything else is sheer heaven."

Stephanie laughed at his exaggerated speech. "Heaven would be very nice."

"I'll do my best."

"Then I will not be disappointed."

Daniel grinned. "That sounds like a challenge."

"I can only stay a few hours," she responded, sounding a little breathless, "for I wish to maintain some semblance of propriety. My sister-in-law's arrival in London yesterday makes everything

so much less convenient, since she is staying with me. We will have to *utilize* the time we have wisely.”

His body reacted to those soft suggestive words with predictable alacrity, his erection starting to swell. “I’ll endeavor to make every moment count, my lady.”

The carriage started to slow as he spoke, rocking in a few moments to a halt.

His townhouse was well lit in anticipation of his arrival home for the evening. After informing his driver he would need to be available to take Lady Lakes home later, Daniel escorted Stephanie up the steps and inside the foyer, one hand on her slim waist, his body starting already to tighten in need. Dismissing the young footman who hovered by the door for the night with a murmured thanks, he waited until the young man disappeared down the hall. Leaning forward, he inhaled the delicate fragrance of her floral perfume, whispering in her ear, “You enchant me.”

“Take me upstairs,” she said in hushed response. “Now, Daniel...I need you.”

The invitation was more than enough, as was the quiver of open desire in her voice. Lifting her in his arms, he took the long curving stairs swiftly, carrying her into his bedroom and kicking the door shut with his foot.

He deposited her on the bed he’d had sent over from Spain, a massive piece of dark, beautiful carved wood that once belonged to a powerful don, the artistry of the work remarkable. Waist high, it was an impressive size and dominated the room, and it was even more lovely with Stephanie lounging on it in a languid sprawl of enticing pale skin and rumpled silken skirts. She reached up and pulled the pins from her hair so it slid over her shoulders in a heavy, raven mass that gleamed in the thin moonlight coming in the window. “Undress me,” she whispered, looking up at him from under her lush lashes.

“You must have read my mind,” he said huskily, lifting her wine-colored skirts and running his hands up the long length of her legs. Deftly unfastening her garters, he slid off one silk stocking, and then the other, his fingers gliding against her warm, satin skin, taking her slippers as well. Her feet were dainty and small in his hands. He leaned forward and kissed her bare ankle, grazing her calf with his mouth.

She shivered in reaction, her lashes drifting lower.

His cock was entirely rigid now, just from the fragrance of her skin and the sight of her compliant, waiting body on his bed. “Lift your arms,” he ordered as he urged her to a sitting position. “Yes, that’s it exactly. I want to take off your dress without doing it damage, but I’m a little impatient, as maybe you can see.”

Her gaze dropped to the bulge in his tight breeches, and she smiled, a secretive feminine smile that made his blood race even faster. “You look very interested in something, Colonel.”

“You’ll see just how interested in just a moment,” he promised on a low growl, his fingers moving on the intricate fastenings of her fashionable gown. In record time, he managed to fully disrobe her, and Stephanie reclined, nude and all opulent curves, as he jerked off his cravat and shirt, then sat down to remove his boots and breeches.

He joined her, climbing onto the high bed, his arms closing around her slender, voluptuous body as he tugged her into his embrace and an ardent kiss that reflected his current state of high need. Her mouth was warm, sweet and receptive, and he used his tongue to explore every inch, tasting her lips time and again as his cock throbbed against the soft flat plane of her stomach. Slim fingers slid into his hair as she kissed him back with equal open desire.

Freeing her mouth, he teased the perfect line of her jaw, kissing the fragile hollow beneath her ear, lightly nipping at her earlobe. “I

am not at all sure how long I am going to last this first time. Just a word of warning.”

Her laugh was low and seductive. “You do feel very...eager, Daniel.”

Sliding a hand between their bodies, she found him, lightly encircling his stiff penis with exploring fingers, which squeezed lightly and made the breath go out of his chest. His testicles were full and heavy and ached with that teasing touch. “That’s not going to help,” he rasped against her smooth skin, his mouth trailing down to where her pulse beat in her throat with a light and rapid rhythm. “And two, my lovely lady, can play that game.”

Her breasts were opulent and firm, filling his palm to overflowing as he lifted one and tested the silken pliant weight, his bronzed fingers looking dark against the alabaster hue of her skin. Beautiful, deep rose nipples tightened as he fondled and caressed, becoming hard and puckered. Taking one taut crest into his mouth, he heard Stephanie gasp in pleasure, her eyes drifting shut as he began to suckle it deep and lave it with long hungry strokes of his tongue.

The ferocity of his arousal was too much for him to indulge long in foreplay; though somewhere in the back of his brain, he found that unsettling, for he usually had formidable sexual control. Heated lust overwhelmed his senses, gripping his entire body, and when he slid his hand between her legs to explore her sex, he was gratified to find the woman beside him was wet, hot, and ready. “Sorry for the lack of finesse, darling,” he said on a harsh note of sheer animal need, and shifted easily, his knees pushing her slim legs apart. “I find my impatience overcomes any gentlemanly qualities I may possess. Hold on.”

Guiding the tip of his erection to her entrance, he thrust inside. His eyes shut momentarily, white-hot rapture soaring through every nerve-ending. Her vaginal passage was tight, but yielding, the tiny inner muscles clenching around his carnal invasion. Ebony

curls framed her pale shoulders and spilled over the coverlet. Her throat was an arched white column in the dim light as she made a low sexy sound of acceptance and dug her nails into his shoulders. "Daniel."

"I'm right here," he managed somehow to say, pushing deep between her open thighs. His whole body was tense, yearning, and he felt a gentle sweat sheen his skin.

Arms braced on either side of her luscious body, he began to move, settling into a rhythm of fast thrusts and withdrawals. Beneath him, Stephanie matched his urgency, lifting her hips to accept his rigid penetration, her hands imploring at the sensitive small of his back. The sensation was even more arousing because he felt her equal impatience, and he bent his head to take her mouth in a searing kiss that left them both breathless and gasping.

"Oh, yes," she moaned, her thighs tightening around his surging hips, her long dark lashes fluttering. Full breasts quivered and shifted with each thrust, and her smooth cheeks were flushed with the onslaught of her rising orgasm. He could feel the fluids of her arousal lubricating his cock, aiding the slick slide of his cock inside her vagina. She panted. "Harder."



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