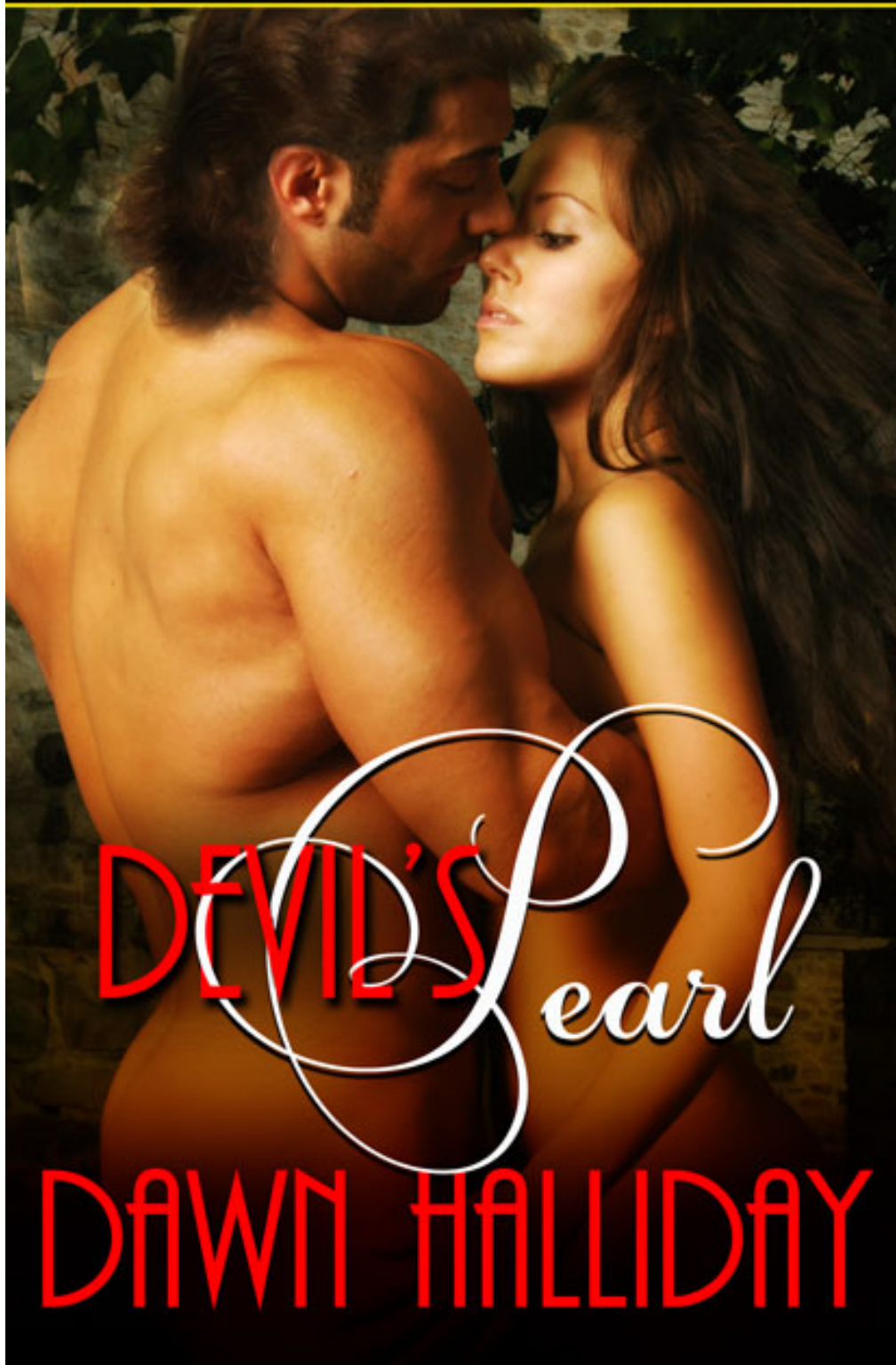


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Devil's Pearl

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DEVIL'S PEARL

Dawn Halliday

Dedication

For Lawrence, the members of ERCC, Mira and Kelly, and my editor Mary. Without you, this never would have happened. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Prologue

London, 1829

Julia Beaumont walked with heavy steps toward the chamber Sir Devlin Vaughn had reserved. Her heart felt like a hollow shell, pinging against her breast with every stride she made down the narrow hallway.

She was going to tell him it was over.

The door loomed ahead and she stopped, staring at it. Rowdy sounds drifted from the tavern below, but beyond the door there was only silence. She knew he would be alone, waiting for her, sitting before the fire wearing his red silk banyan and perhaps reading a newspaper.

Though she'd gone over it a thousand times in her head, she suddenly drew a blank. How could she tell him she was leaving? How could she look into his brooding, handsome face and tell him she never wanted to see him again, touch him again?

She couldn't do it.

Slowly, she drew in a long, resolute breath. For her own sake, she *must* do it. For the sake of her reputation, for her future. The most important things to her were the lifelong companionship of a husband and the legitimacy of the children she would someday bear. She would leave him because she wanted to be more than the mistress of a baronet.

It must be done. Here and now. If she did not leave Devlin, he would destroy her. She would fall ever more deeply in love with him. Then someday he would leave her. He would decide he needed an heir and would marry, or perhaps he would simply grow tired of her and leave her for someone fresh to warm his bed. Either way, it was inevitable. He would break her heart.

Squaring her shoulders, Julia turned the knob and pushed open the door. The room was bright and cheerful with a roaring fire in the hearth and crisp sunlight streaming in through gauze curtains. When he couldn't have her at his house, Devlin always demanded this room—it was the inn's finest and the proprietor made certain it was kept spotless for his wealthy client's illicit visits with his mistress. Or was it mistresses? Julia didn't know. She sucked in a harsh breath.

Setting down his newspaper onto the round table beside the armchair, Devlin turned. A rare smile spread across his features, softening his square jaw and stern, dark eyes. Julia relaxed minutely.

"Julia," he said. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you too." It had only been a week since they last met, but it was the truth. Despite her resolve to leave him, she missed him every moment they were apart.

He held out his arms. "Come."

She should say no. But the way he looked at her, firm and resolute, his eyes sparkling with promise, made her knees weak with anticipation. She had seen him only infrequently among other people, but it seemed he reserved this look for her—soft and sensuous, but rough around the edges with the promise of desires fulfilled.

He was irresistible. She would let him hold her one more time, then she would tell him it was over. After all, she deserved one last foray into the fantasy of this impossible fairytale. He was a baronet of a rich and enduring bloodline while she was a commoner whose family hovered on the fringes of society. But for one last time, she could go into his arms, close her eyes and pretend it meant more.

Julia moved forward until she stood directly before him. He reached up and rested his big hands on the curve of her hips. Face filled with masculine appreciation, he looked her up and down, taking in the tight bodice of pale pink, the lace tucked into her collar revealing the barest hint of cleavage, the curls framing her face and skimming her shoulders.

One hand moved from her hip and brushed over the flat panel of her bodice, then higher over her breast. As always, his touch sent tremors rippling through her body. Never taking his eyes from hers, he continued his movement, lightly tracing her collarbone, then her shoulder, down her arm and finally lacing his fingers through hers.

"Beautiful," he said, then drew her into his lap.

Her small body melted into his large one. She fit perfectly on his lap, her head resting on the silk covering the front of his shoulder.

Working slowly, he untied her bonnet and set it aside, then flung away her hairpins one by one. He always tossed them away like this, but she never complained. She liked the deliberate way he rid her of them as if they were in his way, a troublesome annoyance that kept her hair from flowing long the way he liked it. But collecting the pins every week after their liaisons was a frustrating exercise in futility.

She closed her eyes for a few moments and simply enjoyed feeling his hands on her. But then a warning bell clanged within her. She should end it now, before things went too far.

"Dev?"

"Shh. No talking." He spoke into her hair, his warm breath tingling her scalp. "I'm going to love you first."

Love? He'd never before used that word in her presence. The part of her that so desperately wanted his love melted like a wax candle and her limbs felt smooth and hot, malleable to his strong, steady touch. The part of her so determined to walk away flickered out like the candle's flame blown by a strong draft. Gone. She was his. His like she always was — his forever, however he wanted.

Lifting her easily, he rose and laid her on her belly on the carpet before the fire. His fingers skimmed down her back as he worked the ties on her gown, her petticoat and finally her corset. Then he said, "Shed it. All of it. I want to see you naked."

She rose, first to her knees, then to her feet. This was to be their last time, and the knowledge of it made every movement, every touch, every expression on his face all the

more powerful. As her gown and petticoat brushed down her torso and gathered at her knees, her skin prickled, more sensitive than ever before. She pulled off her corset and finally removed her chemise. Now she wore only her drawers.

Devlin reached forward, hooked the waist of her drawers with his fingers and slipped them down to her ankles. As Julia stepped out of them, he untied his banyan and it gaped open, revealing the length of his torso. Just as she'd suspected, he wore nothing beneath.

She gulped in a breath at the vision of his body. The same thrill rushed through her each time she caught a glimpse of the flesh normally hidden by his clothing. Never in her life had she seen anything as innately masculine as Sir Devlin Vaughn naked. His big body rippled with strength, with power. She could not get enough of him, would never grow tired of him, would never understand how he could frighten her and make her feel so safe at the same time.

Her exposed skin bristled with awareness of him. A heaviness pooled around her center and she knew her body was preparing for his invasion. She welcomed it.

His eyes flicked to the floor. Julia dropped to her knees to face his cock, which stood upright, its veins swollen and pulsing with life. Dev moved to the edge of the chair and she nuzzled against him, her lips against his heavy sac, the long length of his shaft pressing against her face.

Inhaling a deep breath through her nose, she took in the mixture of smoke and sandalwood and something purely masculine, purely Dev. She'd never forget it. She gulped it in like someone deprived of oxygen, then dragged her tongue up the thick vein on the underside of his cock. She reveled in the feel of him beneath her lips, rock hard but the skin so velvety and taut she wanted to lick it all over. Devour it.

Grasping his shaft between her palms, she slid them up and down in a silken glide. A bead of cloudy liquid appeared on the tip, and she flattened her tongue over it eagerly, taking in his strong, smooth essence. She basked in the taste and smell of Devlin as she teased his cock head with fluttering strokes of her tongue. She could do

this forever — simply sink herself into pleasuring him. She thrived on the low noises he made, thrived on feeling his cock twitch and pulse and grow beneath her mouth and hands. It was almost as if his pleasure bled into hers and built the pressure between her legs until she was panting and gasping with every lick, stroke and suck she pressed onto his beautiful cock.

With a low groan, he pushed her away. "Lie back."

Julia obeyed without hesitation. Though a part of her knew it should offend her that he ordered her about, in truth it made her hotter. As a rule, the more demanding and selfish he was, the more intensely she would climax.

Keeping her gaze fixed on his bobbing, glistening rod, she lowered herself onto her elbows and spread her legs in offering, opening herself in his direct sight. Her fingers traveled down her stomach and stopped just above her mons, pushing gently to relieve a bit of the pressure. But only one thing could truly relieve her now.

Dev breathed heavily, his chest rising and falling with each intake of air. He moved off the chair and onto his knees between her feet. Reaching forward, he slid his index finger down her slit. She gasped, her body involuntarily arching up to greet him. He drew his hand away and stared at his shining finger as if fascinated by the evidence of her lust.

Lying before him with her legs spread wide, Julia felt alone and vulnerable. He was too far away. She needed him to cover her, to touch her, to take her.

"Turn over," he said gruffly.

Julia instantly flipped to her belly. Dev grasped her hips and raised them, and once again she exposed everything to him, this time from behind. She could feel the slickness between her thighs and knew she must be glistening with her own juices.

"That's a very pretty sight."

She turned her head to see him kneeling behind her, absently stroking the long length of his cock, his eyes fastened on her backside.

She wiggled wantonly, soundlessly pleading for him to touch her, to do *something*.

With a low laugh he released himself, placed his big hands over the curves of her behind, his thumbs on the lips of her pussy, and spread her wide open.

She gasped as the heat of his breath washed over her sensitive inner folds. Then he lowered his mouth over her, flicking her with the point of his tongue. He had never taken her with his mouth from this angle before, and it felt different, all the more arousing for its novelty.

Julia pressed her forehead to the floor, sweat breaking out on her temples as he traced a path down her slit, leisurely lapping at the cream dribbling from her core. Her body ached to be filled—by his fingers or cock, it didn't matter. As long as he kept doing whatever he was doing with his mouth.

But then his tongue moved higher, close to the tight bud of her anus, and she stiffened. He must have felt her sudden anxiety because he moved down again, taunting her clit with an agonizing circle of his tongue. The torment went on and on, building until she couldn't stop herself from moaning and squirming. Just as she was about to come, he'd move away to tantalize her aching opening, leaving her stranded on the edge of the cliff but unable to make the leap.

On the verge of mindlessness, she finally gasped, "You're teasing me!"

"Mmhmm." The word reverberated against her most sensitive spot, and she bucked against him, unable to stop the jerking movement of her body.

"Fuck me, Devlin. Please. Just one more time." She couldn't remember ever having used that word before, but she didn't care. She needed it—wanted it like she had never wanted anything else.

He laughed again and drew away, his hands still firmly covering the cheeks of her buttocks, his fingers kneading into her flesh. He swiped a thumb over her clit, making her body jerk again.

Looking over her shoulder, Julia met his dark gaze. Though his lips didn't crack, she could see the smile in his eyes. He was happy.

A wave of guilt crashed into her and in that instant, Julia knew that when she left him, it would hurt him terribly.

But she must leave him. She must. She looked away, squeezing her eyes shut.

He flicked his thumb over her again, and she gasped, jolted back into the present. "Please, Dev."

He chuckled. "You're so pretty when you beg, Julia."

Grasping her hips, Devlin neatly flipped her to her back. Her legs fell apart and he moved over her, dropping low so his chest pressed against her aching breasts. His lips touched hers, inquisitive at first, then taking her mouth more deeply as his cock found her entrance and slowly, torturously, pushed inside.

Finally! Finally he gave her what she needed.

He nudged deeper until he was lodged completely inside her, the thick head of his cock pressed against her womb. For a long, aching moment, he held still. Then, with a speed she couldn't have predicted, he pulled out and slammed his cock all the way in with one powerful thrust.

Julia cried out as her body released instantly, spasming around the hard length of him. As the climax washed over her in relentless, pounding waves, Dev continued to piston in and out of her, each thrust forcing her body to stretch to its limits.

Julia didn't know how long she reveled in each smooth, hard stroke of his cock. Minutes or hours? It didn't matter. All that mattered was his hot skin against hers, his cock making that journey inside her over and over, sending a searing, liquid pleasure racing through every part of her.

Dev's body hardened. Sweat broke out on his forehead, his jaw tensed and the look in his eyes became more determined. Julia skimmed her fingertips over his hard chest down to the ripples of his abdomen and up the quivering muscles of his arms.

"Yes, Dev. Yes, yes."

This was exactly what she needed to remember him by. With an uncontrollable sob, she gripped him tighter. At that moment, he gave a harsh cry and yanked out of her. Hot seed spurted onto her belly and she pressed her body into his cock, moaning softly at the steady pulse of his release against her skin.

He slumped over her, shuddering in her arms. Then he rolled away, stretched and pecked her on the cheek. "That was very nice, my dear."

Julia's pulse quickened. *Very nice?*

Devlin sighed, nuzzling his face into her hair. "It's a bloody inconvenience, but I have a solicitor appointment in less than an hour."

Julia lay still and stared at the ceiling, not trusting herself to move. If she moved, she might burst into tears. Or try to hit him. Or both.

"Next week, then?"

She couldn't answer. It was always like this. She left her uncle's home once a week with some excuse that would keep her occupied for the afternoon and she came to the inn or to his house, whichever Dev preferred. The days with him were pure heaven, fantasies come true. He was attentive, gentle and caring when she needed it, rough and commanding when she lusted for it. Between their meetings, she dreamed about him, about the discussions they might have, about what he would do to her. How he made her feel—it was beyond anything she'd ever experienced, ever dreamed of experiencing.

But after he came, he closed himself like a book slamming shut. When it was over, he became distant and aloof. He returned to his real life and expected her to do the same.

Each time they met, her understanding had increased. She realized she had been a naïve, simpleminded fool. He wanted her only as a mistress, an object for his convenience. And what would happen when he tired of this arrangement?

If he loved her, if he really wanted her, then he would marry her. Instead, he had taken her virginity, stolen her chastity and had done nothing to protect her reputation.

It was bad enough that he would not marry her himself, but she had been a willing partner in ruining her chances for any good marriage with a gentleman.

Devlin had seduced her easily. Julia had taken one look at him and *wanted* to be seduced. Nothing had seemed more important than his touch. Still, she met with him several times before she gave in. And by then she'd fallen so hard she honestly believed his caresses would end in marriage. Her overwhelming attraction to Dev had deluded her into believing in the fairytale.

But she didn't believe in fairytales anymore.

With a soft groan, Devlin rose, taking up his banyan and carelessly flinging it across his broad shoulders. Julia knew that his valet waited in a nearby chamber with his fashionable clothes, ready to dress him, probably with a basin of water and washcloth to bathe all evidence of her away.

Blinking back her tears, she looked up at him.

His eyes softened as he gazed down at her, then he knelt beside her and gathered her in his arms. Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, he wiped his seed from her belly.

"I hate to go so soon, but I will count the hours until next week." He smiled gently and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. An uncertain look crossed his face. "I...ah..." He cleared his throat. "I left a little something for you on the table."

He always left trinkets for her—earrings, brooches, necklaces. She took them and stored them in a box, but never wore them. How could she? He paid her like a whore because she *was* his whore. A tear traveled down the side of Julia's face but he didn't see it as he rose to go, murmuring, "Goodbye, Little Pearl."

The door clicked shut behind him.

Julia stared at the still-roaring fire. *He thinks he owns you*, the voice of doubt within her cried. But he could not own her. No, she wouldn't allow it. Nobody but her husband deserved ownership of her body.

And Sir Devlin Vaughn would never marry her. He would never stoop so low.

* * * * *

Devlin fidgeted in his seat, unable to keep his attention on the opera.

Julia had not come to him this week, or last. He was worried and confused. Why hadn't she come? Was she ill? Had her family forbidden her to return to him? He should have arranged lodgings for her—it was too difficult for her to have to steal away from her uncle's house to have their liaisons.

But each time she came to see him, everything was so right, so perfect. How could he think of the future when the present was so sweet?

He resolved to find her a home of her own. A small, well-appointed townhouse somewhere within minutes of his estate in Mayfair. Perhaps near a park, he thought, remembering their long walks with fondness. Tomorrow he would visit his lawyer and arrange everything. After all, there was no reason to be secretive anymore. He wanted the world to know that she belonged to him.

But where was she? He *needed* her. He had to find her.

If he knew where her family lived, he would have sought her out, gone to her door and demanded to see her. But the logical part of him wondered what he might have said to her uncle when he answered the door. "Good evening, sir. I've been fucking your niece weekly, but she hasn't shown up for the past fortnight and my cock is going mad from being denied her hot, sweet cunt. Would you be so kind as to let me know what's detained her?"

Devlin rolled his shoulders and sighed. Despite the long hours they'd spent talking and making love, she had never told him her address. How could he have neglected to ask such basic information?

Still, he knew her surname and that was a start. She shouldn't be too difficult to find. He'd start looking after he visited his lawyer tomorrow. If nothing else, he had to ensure she was all right.

The opera finally ended. Devlin rose and stretched, then grabbed his overcoat from a servant and left the solitude of his box to join the rush of people exiting the theater.

Across the lobby, he glimpsed curling dark hair, then a flash of red. Julia's hair was that exact shade, and she owned a gown of that exact color. Once they had met at night, and he had stripped it off her before he'd taken her over the arm of a sofa.

He rounded a Grecian pillar and caught a glimpse of the woman again, passing through the door to the outside. Yes, it must be her. Although her back was to him, he recognized the way she moved.

Julia! Devlin's heart surged with joy. Not caring who saw him, he pushed through the crowd.

"Miss Beaumont!" he shouted, thrusting past a man hesitating at the door.

She turned. Surprise and then a look of dread crossed over her face. She froze, staring at him. A shadow fell across her shoulders and Devlin realized a man stood beside her.

He slowed his step, recognizing the man at once. It was Bertram Wilder, Viscount Clayton, a man known throughout London for his debauchery.

Clayton's hand was on Julia's arm. Fury pulsed in Devlin's temples, drawing him short just a few feet in front of them. He watched in horror as Julia's delicate fingers curled around Clayton's wrist.

"Vaughn." Clayton's voice was smug. Devlin clenched his fists at his sides, looking to the right and left. People were watching them, curiosity in their eyes. It was too late for propriety. There would be gossip no matter what happened now. He kept his eyes off the other man, fearing that if he looked too closely, he'd see the same smugness in the face that he'd heard in the voice. If that happened, he wasn't sure whether he could keep his fists to himself.

"Miss Beaumont..."

She nodded, and a wary look crept into her blue eyes.

There was no way to keep this conversation innocent, but he kept his voice low. "You haven't come."

"I haven't." Her voice was a soft confirmation.

"Why?"

"I'm...I'm leaving you," she said.

Rage swept through him in a torrent. "You're *what*?"

People were everywhere, crowding them, listening. Devlin pressed his lips together to keep from shouting at them all to go away.

Julia blinked, her dark lashes sweeping low, and then gazed at him with defiant eyes. "I am leaving you, Devlin. It is over between you and me. Over."

Devlin flicked a glance at the viscount—yes, the look was smug, just as he'd imagined. Surely Julia knew better than to leave with this man. She must know Clayton would only want one thing from her.

He forced his gaze to return to Julia. "This is a farce. You are joking."

Clayton blew out a breath and seemed about to speak, but she interrupted him.

"No, I am not joking. Whatever you and I had, it is finished. I will not see you again—not tonight, not ever."

Devlin's mind roared. He couldn't think, couldn't speak, couldn't act. She couldn't leave him. Impossible.

He loved her.

He had completely misinterpreted her absence. Not once had he imagined she might leave him for another man. For *Viscount Clayton*, of all men. It made his skin crawl to think of that man's hands on her untainted skin.

The viscount reached up and squeezed her forearm. She shot him a grateful glance and something curdled in Devlin's gut.

Clayton's lip curled. "She no longer has any interest in you."

Devlin's lips pressed together so hard they went numb. His fists clenched and unclenched at his sides. His face burned.

Clayton leaned forward to hiss in his ear, "Clearly I have made the better offer."

Every nerve Devlin possessed bristled with outrage.

Thinning his lips, Clayton straightened and raised his eyebrows, looking every inch the aristocratic ass he was. "Give it up, Vaughn," he sniffed. He turned on his heel and marched her toward an ornate carriage parked at the curb.

"Julia, you must not do this. You're making a mistake!" Devlin called in mounting desperation. God, this could not be happening. She could not leave him.

She didn't seem to hear the pleading in his voice. Everyone was watching. A lady tittered behind him as Clayton helped Julia into the carriage. Devlin blinked back a sudden onslaught of water in his eyes — tears of pain, of rage.

"Julia, please don't! Don't go!"

He saw her press her gloved hands over her eyes as the carriage door slammed shut.

"Julia!" he shouted.

She was gone.

Chapter One

One Year Later

He had her. After twelve long months of searching, he had her in his sights.

Devlin sank deeper into the smoky shadows of the gaudy drawing room, watching her flick her cards open and smile prettily at the man opposite her. The dark tresses framing her face bounced to her shoulders and her small hand curled suggestively around the cards.

He shook off the memory of that hand curling around his cock, caressing him, bringing him to fulfillment with a velvet touch. He'd taught her that particular skill, but no other woman he'd known had such a talented hand. And he'd known many.

The bitch would pay handsomely for what she had done to him. She'd left him brutally, nearly bringing him to his knees before hundreds of people. Then she'd gone to the Continent and become a high-priced courtesan, so pretentious that even the deep-pocketed Viscount Clayton hadn't been able to satisfy her expensive tastes.

Now men surrounded her, vying for her attention. She knew it and played it up, teasing and coy. Some fop whispered to her and she gazed at him from beneath sooty lashes, laughing delicately. Oh she knew what she was doing—she'd once done it to Devlin. She'd played him for a fool.

Bitter resentment welled up in Devlin's gut and he dragged in a lungful of air. He could not watch anymore. He slipped out the door and down the steps to lie in wait.

He had loved her once. Completely. Desperately. He would have given her anything. In those long, lazy afternoons, she made him believe she loved him too. It was all a farce, though—a whore's sham.

Coldness pierced Devlin's many woolen layers. He paced the dark alleyway with his hands clasped behind his back and gazed up at the star-speckled sky. Ice crunched under his feet.

She would come out with one of the men. He knew it, but could not contain the fury it incited in him. He assumed the man would take her to some elegant townhouse and fuck her. Eventually she would leave her sated customer and Devlin would snatch her away. Then he would keep her with him, whether she wanted to be kept or not.

By the time she finally exited the party, the wound she had inflicted a year ago was open, raw and burning. Devlin had forgotten the cold.

She was on the arm of not one, but *two* men.

Rage boiling, he lunged to his feet and followed them.

* * * * *

"Miss Beaumont, I fear you've had a bit too much of the bubbly."

Julia grinned at the teasing tone in her cousin's voice. "It is true, I daresay, Algie," she said, "but Lud, it feels *marvelous* to be a touch addled."

She rose up on her tiptoes, leaned in and kissed Algernon Ayers' smooth cheek, stumbling on a cobble in the process. The men righted her promptly.

She wasn't truly drunk. The two glasses of champagne she'd taken were just enough to make her feel a bit loose around the edges.

"It was so much fun, wasn't it?" She sighed, blowing a curl out of her face. It had been so long since she'd felt this content. When she'd left England for Paris, she had not expected the abyss her life would fall into. Viscount Clayton, who she'd trusted as a friend and confidant, had turned on her when she'd rejected his advances. After that horrible night, he'd returned to London and spread vicious lies about her.

Knowing she'd never again be welcomed at her uncle's house in London, she had lived in Paris on the edge of destitution for ten months, trying to live off the odd sewing job and struggling desperately to make ends meet when Algernon had arrived to bring

her back to England. With her talent for clothing design, he said, she could make something of herself in London. After all that had happened between her and Lord Clayton in Paris, Algernon made her believe there was more to her than a pretty face, made her believe in her innate value as a human being. She loved him for that.

Now she staggered home between Algie and Thomas Jones, her cousin's lover. Algernon and Julia had been inseparable in childhood and had stayed close, the two black sheep in their pious, family.

Thomas grinned. "It was fun indeed, m'dear. You are ravishing. You had every gentleman at the party primed to drop to his knees for you."

Algernon flashed Thomas a quelling look. She squeezed his forearm. "Do not worry about me, dear Algie," she said.

"I am not worried about you, Julia. You are a brave woman, and you have proven your ability to make the proper choices for yourself."

She smiled gratefully. Returning home was the most frightening thing she had ever done, and she could not have done it without Algernon. He had given her the position as head seamstress in his stylish tailoring shop, a job which kept her separated from society, in whose eyes she was now a pariah, a ruined woman ten times over. Tonight it had been fun to flirt a little, but she had no plans to try to reestablish herself in society. It would be nearly impossible considering how Viscount Clayton had slandered her.

She was someone altogether different than the person she was a year ago. Never again would she allow a man to lead her, to use her. In the end, she had learned, they only wanted one thing, and it was always temporary. Lord Clayton, whose intentions she had so naïvely thought honorable, had driven the lesson home.

A voice yanked Julia from her thoughts.

"Stop."

All three of them froze. The voice had come from behind them. Cool. Deadly. Familiar. Algernon and Thomas dropped her arms and spun around. Julia turned more slowly, fear rising like a flood in her gullet.

The man stood in the shadows about ten feet away. He cocked his pistol and aimed it directly at her heart.

His voice pierced the still night air. "Walk slowly toward me, Julia. You two," he waved the pistol at Algernon, then at Thomas, "do not move, or I will shoot her."

Julia cast a frantic look at their surroundings. She did not know the street, only that they were somewhere near Algernon's house in Bedford Place. It was a narrow street, quiet, with not a soul in sight. The houses abutting the pavement were dark, their occupants long since retired for the evening. But if she screamed loudly enough...

No sooner had she opened her mouth to do just that than the man took a step forward and snapped, "Scream and I will shoot him."

He trained the pistol on Algernon.

"Shoot me then," Algernon said, brave, blessed soul that he was. She was close enough to him, however, that she could feel the tremors running through his body. "I will not let you harm this lady."

The man laughed. "Well now, she's hardly a lady, is she?"

She knew that laugh, that voice. A strangled sob erupted from her throat. Like everyone else of his class in London, Sir Devlin Vaughn thought her a trollop. Lord Clayton had not forgotten anyone when he spread his vicious lies.

It hurt, but she shouldn't be surprised.

She nudged Algernon with her elbow. "I know him. It is Sir Devlin Vaughn. He was the one—" She drew a shallow breath. "I know him."

Thomas gripped her elbow. "We will not let him take you, Julia."

In the gloom, she could not decipher the look upon Dev's face, but he steadily pointed his weapon at Algernon.

How she had missed him. Part of her wanted to run to him, to throw herself into his arms. Ridiculous, considering he threatened both her and her cousin's lives. But she

could not help remembering the talks and laughter they had shared, the cozy days in his bed and at the inn, the passionate lovemaking...

A shudder rolled through her. Relinquishing her body to him had given her the most profound pleasure she had ever known. Life in the past year had been cold and dry in comparison.

"Step forward, Julia," he said, his voice low and confident—the tone of one accustomed to command.

Waves of heat pulsed across her skin, centering low in her belly, pooling into desire. *No, no, no.* What a traitorous body she had.

Sir Devlin Vaughn had ruined and demeaned her, and now he threatened her closest friends in the world. She clenched her jaw against a sudden flare of anger. How dare he threaten Algernon and Thomas?

"Let me go to him," she whispered to her cousin.

"Julia, you are not thinking clearly! We will fight for you."

"I am thinking clearly, Algernon." And she was. A pistol pointed at one's chest had a magical sobering effect. Devlin, on the other hand, must be three sheets to the wind. What else could have prompted this ridiculous, extreme behavior? "Please don't try to protect me," she whispered to her cousin. "I don't want to see you get hurt."

Dev was her problem and she would face him head-on. She wrenched her arm out of Thomas' grip and took a step forward.

"Julia!" Thomas hissed.

She turned back to give them a smile she hoped masked her quavering insides. "I will see you soon."

Thomas shook his head and began to unbutton his greatcoat, preparing to fight.

"Please do not, Thomas. I beg you. I promise he will not hurt me." A bitter taste rose in her throat at the lie. He could hurt her, but not in the way they imagined. "I

promise, Algie. He would never harm me. If I am not home tomorrow, call at his house in Mayfair."

Thomas' hands paused over his buttons. A crease appeared between Algernon's brows.

"Please," she whispered. "I don't want you to get killed."

"Julia—"

Now. She had to go to Dev now or they would do something rash. She couldn't allow that to happen. She turned her back on them and strode up to Dev, stopping when the barrel of the pistol dug into her bosom.

She looked up into his handsome face, with its straight, long nose, square jaw and brooding eyes. Ignoring her stuttering heartbeat, she met his dark gaze.

"Here I am, Sir Devlin." And a rebellious spark somewhere deep within her added, *Now what are you going to do with me?*

Chapter Two

Keeping his pistol trained on the men, Devlin pulled Julia around the corner. Once they were out of sight, he half pushed, half dragged her to Tottenham Court Road, where he hailed a hackney.

It had been hotheaded and imprudent to take her so publicly, but he could not stomach the thought of her fucking those two little men. He kept the pistol trained at her side and muttered, "Not a word," as he nudged her inside the cab.

The ride to his house was brief, filled with silent tension. His thigh pressed against hers. He could not take his eyes off her. Christ, he wanted her, even when she sat stiff and proper beside him, even when she refused to meet his gaze. His body was one taut, flaming nerve. If she reached out and touched his cock, he would explode.

When the hackney lurched to a stop, they emerged at the gate of his home. An excellent place to keep a prisoner, it boasted large stretches of lawn on all sides, separating him from neighbors and busy streets. He had sent all the servants except his valet, Whittle, to his country estate. Whittle knew how to turn a deaf ear and keep his mouth shut.

When they stepped into his dimly lit entrance hall, he slammed the door behind them and ripped off his top hat.

She pushed her back up against the blue-painted wall. The fire from the oil lamp burning on the occasional table reflected off her wide eyes, making them spark gold. "Why are you doing this, Dev?"

"I am not paying you to ask questions," he snapped.

"You are not paying me at all."

He flung his coat onto the table and set the pistol on top of it. "And how much do you charge for your whoring, Julia? Tuppence?"

She winced. "I am no whore."

He stepped up to her, unclasped her cloak and let it fall to the floor. He pressed his body against hers, grinding into her, his cock pushing against her belly. He angled his lips so they brushed hers. "Once a whore, always a whore. Didn't you know?"

Defiance sparked in her blue eyes. "I never was a whore. You tried to turn me into one. *You*."

He reached down and pulled her wrists above her head, pinning them to the wall with one hand, his iron grasp immune to her attempts to free herself. He moved his free hand down the side of her face, her neck. How he'd missed her warm, pliant flesh. Nobody's skin felt like Julia's, no body reacted to him like hers, no cunt squeezed him so tight. He moved his hand down her silk-clad shoulder and over her breast. Her nipple puckered through her bodice and he pinched it, drawing it out.

"Stop, Devlin."

He laughed harshly. "Why should I? You fuck every Englishman on the Continent and now you're back in London taking on two at a time. What's one more?"

She inhaled sharply. "You never —"

"I never what? Take an unwilling woman? But you're willing, aren't you? You will open your legs for any fellow so long as he's rich enough, won't you?"

"No!"

"I'm rich as Croesus, Julia. Have you forgotten?" He leaned down and brushed his lips against her ear. "Why, I would wager you're already wet. Are you? Are you dripping from your quim?"

She shuddered beneath him. Her breath came in little pants. He remembered how she'd loved it when he was rough with her. She was hot for him now. He could feel it. He could smell the tang of her arousal beneath the perfume of her rosewater.

She squeezed her eyes shut. "Please, Dev —"

“Please what? Please fuck you? You can be certain that’s going to happen, my dear. I’ve been waiting a long time for this moment.” He drew out her hatpins, cast her hat to the floor and buried his face in her hair. The smell of her so close made his heart clench, his body tighten, his mind reel. He spoke softly. “Why have you been hiding from me, Little Pearl?”

The nickname shocked him as much as it did her. He drew back and they locked eyes.

Why had the name escaped from his lips? It was the nickname he had used after they made love. Or at least that was what he thought they had made. Until she exposed her true colors by running off with the viscount.

She wouldn’t run off again. This time he would tie her to him, if necessary.

He broke eye contact, stepped back, grabbed her wrist in one hand and the lantern in the other and towed her up the stairs.

He took her past his own suite of rooms to the chamber he had prepared for her. He had thrown out all the miscellaneous furniture and decoration and furnished it only with a gigantic bed covered with satin sheets, draped with India chintz curtains and piled high with red and white quilts and pillows. He had removed the paintings from the walls, boarded the window and set a deadbolt on the door. The room had remained this way for months, waiting for her.

“Welcome to your new home,” Devlin said, tugging her inside. He deposited the lamp on a table beside the bed.

She spun around to face him. “Dev, what is wrong with you?”

You are.

But he couldn’t say it, of course. He couldn’t let her see his weakness. He closed the door and leaned against it, unbuttoning his tailcoat. “Remove your clothes down to your corset and get on the bed.”

She drew herself up tall and faced him at her full height. Still she was small, nearly a foot shorter and at least seven stone lighter than him. Her lovely face settled into determined lines. "No."

He took a step into the room, curled his fists at his sides and raised an expectant brow.

Clamping her lips together, she shook her head.

How dare she? How dare she giggle and flirt on the arms of two men, two strangers? How dare she kiss their cheeks and cheerfully waltz down the street on her way to be fucked by them both? How could she go so willingly with them and then stare him in the face and say no?

Devlin's shoulders shook. He turned away and braced his hands, palms flat, on the door. He wanted to cry, to scream, to hit something.

Stay calm. Breathing slowly, he quieted his raw nerves. He had her now. She would never sleep with anyone but him ever again. He could live with what she'd done. He must.

Pushing himself away from the door, he turned back to face her, unbuttoning his waistcoat. "Do not say 'no' to me, Julia," he said as coolly as he could. "Take off your gown."

He dropped his waistcoat, pulled off his braces, drew his shirt over his head and kicked off his shoes.

"No." With eyes as wide as a virgin's, she retreated until her back pressed against the boarded window.

He would not be duped by the innocent act. He stepped forward. "Your gown."

"I can't—"

"Do not toy with me, Julia." He reached out, grabbed the sapphire satin of her skirts in one hand and yanked, claspings her firmly about the waist when she lurched forward.

She twisted in his arms, her stomach grazing his straining cock. He lost his grip on rational thought. Dragging her down with him, he sank to his knees.

“Dev,” she panted.

She couldn’t know how long he had wanted her, how he frigged himself or slept with other women only to transpose her face over theirs. It hadn’t been enough. He craved only her ripe breasts, her talented fingers, her tight sheath fluttering around him. She couldn’t conceive of how badly he had ached for her since she’d left him.

He plunged his hand into her raven-colored hair, fighting against the hairpins. Most of her silky hair came loose, and he twisted his fingers in it, forcing her face toward his.

Their lips met in a clash of teeth and tongues. Devlin took her mouth by force, claimed it as his own and sank into the raw pleasure of tasting her again.

She whimpered as his tongue dove into her mouth. The sound pierced all the way through him, arousing him all the more.

She grabbed the collar of his shirt and yanked it apart. Buttons flew and the fine linen tore down the front. Then her greedy hands were on him, stroking his chest, teasing his nipples, tugging the edge of his trousers, confirming what he had already known—she wanted this as much as he did.

Somewhere beneath her voluminous skirts and petticoats, he found her leg. He nudged her knees farther apart, moved his hand over her silk stocking, past her garter, up her thigh. He explored the soft flannel of her drawers and finally found the damp slit that opened to her cunt.

A groan ripped through his body. She was hot. Dripping. Weeping for him.

He could not willfully break away from her mouth, so he used the hand entwined in her hair to drag her head away from him.

“You like that, don’t you Julia?” he growled.

"No," she whispered stubbornly. But her eyes sparked, said something entirely different, and she wrapped her arms around his neck and brought his lips back to hers.

He rubbed his fingers over her tight curls, spread her folds and painted her with her own cream. Clenching his teeth, he sank his middle finger inside. Heat scorched him as her channel quivered over the length of his digit. Oh yes. There it was. He remembered how those little spasms felt. His cock throbbed angrily—it remembered too, and was impatient to replace his finger.

Not yet.

"Please," she moaned against his lips. Her hips rocked toward him, pushing him deeper.

Slowly, he pulled out. She squirmed and shuddered. He plunged two fingers inside and her back bowed.

"My beautiful Julia." Disentangling his hand from her hair, he moved it to the top of her skirts and drew her closer to his body, supporting her weight. He pumped her with his fingers, brushing her sensitive outer folds with the heel of his hand.

Surprising him with the suddenness of it, she screamed and clutched his fingers within her. Her body shook against him as her tight walls pulsed and rippled over his fingers.

So beautiful.

Without pulling his hand away, he shifted and leaned forward, laying her on her back. She squeezed her eyes closed, her chest heaving and her plump breasts straining in her tight bodice.

His cock contracted furiously. He had to be inside. Now.

He pulled his dripping fingers out of her, bunched her skirts and threw them up around her waist. Blasted damned gowns, skirts and petticoats could drive a man mad. He hated them. Hated that there was no time to remove them, that they would shield parts of her from him.

After this was over, he'd get her properly naked. And keep her that way, goddamn it. Forever.

He pushed down his trousers and kicked them off. His cock sprang free, hard and hot and heavy, searching for home. He guided it through the slit in her drawers and slid the sensitive head over her wet folds, biting back a groan.

She arched toward him again. With one powerful lunge, he drove himself inside.

They cried out in unison.

He thrust slowly at first, reveling in the feel of her sheathing him, stroking him. *This* was what he had burned for. What he had craved. What he had needed all these months.

He lowered himself over her, crushing layers of satin and linen between their bodies, arching his back to nip down her exposed neck. He paused at her clavicle, feeling her pulse beat a tattoo against his lips.

He reared up, forgetting everything except the smooth, hot, slick feel of her, everything but the knowledge that he had her now and he would never again let her go.

With every thrust, he pushed her backward on the carpet. His knees burned. His lungs burned. He pumped harder, spearing her, driving her across the floor.

She wrapped her legs and arms around his body, pushing him in ever deeper with her heels, ever closer with her hands.

"Julia." He gazed down at her face, her scrunched eyes, her mouth shaped in a small "o". Her muscles tightened, compressing his cock.

"Come for me, Little Pearl. Come for me." He thrust faster, harder. There was no skin left on his knees. "Please come for me."

"Dev!" With a violent spasm, she did just that, clutching him deep within her body, trembling all around him. She milked his cock relentlessly, finally dragging him along with her. With a roar, he exploded, forcing himself deeper than he'd ever gone. His body shook with each pulse of his cock as it shot his seed deep into her.

When it was over, he withdrew and collapsed beside her, his raging mind finally, wonderfully blank.

* * * * *

Julia turned to gaze at Devlin where he lay slumped facedown beside her.

She had thought herself free from him, but he had just proven to her that she was not. Worse, she had not fought him as she should have. His insistence had caught her on fire, and only his violent ardor – the very thing she had striven to eliminate from her life – had doused it. She had wanted it as much as he had, and her wicked body loved every second.

Further, they had taken no precautions. He could have given her a child.

She bit down hard on the inside of her cheek. She could not despise Devlin as she should. Why could she not despise him? Instead, she despised herself for being so weak.

She knew now, as she had known a year ago, that this could only end badly. If nothing else, she had become a realistic woman. She had stopped dreaming, stopped believing in fairytales. She must cling to her newfound practicality, for it was her lifeline.

He turned his head, saw her gazing at him and brushed his knuckles over her cheek. He looked...tender.

Her heart swelled and then constricted as she remembered what he wanted from her, what all men wanted from her. Tender looks meant nothing.

She could not bear it. She wrenched her face away.

Devlin rose to his feet, suddenly so cold she could feel the ice resonating off him in sheets. "Are you sorry it was just me? Old, tedious Devlin? Sorry you didn't get to have the other two?"

Despicable, hateful, jealous man. No one but he could whisper endearments in her ear and beg her to come, only to try to wound her moments later.

He yanked his trousers over his half-erect penis. "How would you have done them, Julia? Would you let one of them bugger your arse while the other fucked your cunt?"

"Do not say such things. I have never –" She broke off, pressing her lips together in rebellion. He did not deserve an account of her horrible year or an explanation of Algernon and Thomas. He did not deserve anything from her.

His dark eyes glinted. "Haven't let a man bugger you yet? Not even Clayton?"

She stumbled to her feet, clutching her clothing around her. She hated him. *Hated* him. "Have you had quite enough, Devlin? Am I free to go?"

He chuckled. "You misunderstand, my dear. I am keeping you here."

"You cannot do that!"

"Oh but I can. And I will."

"My...companions will be here in the morning. They will search for me."

"Let them search."

She dashed to the exit, but as fast and graceful as a lynx, he beat her to it, edging between her body and the door. "Not so fast, Julia."

"You cannot keep me here. I have a life, a position."

His lip curled into a sneer. "A *position*? Well, you can assume that position here, for me, whenever I damn well please."

"I won't – I will *not* have you as a lover."

He glared at her. "Why?"

"Because you will ruin me."

He let out a burst of harsh laughter. "I saw you tonight. I saw you work that room, then leave draped over the arms of those two whoremongering bastards. You're already ruined, Julia."

"Do not speak of what you do not know. I won't be your whore."

His teeth glinted. "You would be their whore but not mine?"

"I am nobody's whore!" she exclaimed.

"You lie."

"I'm not lying. I never sold my body."

"Tell me Viscount Clayton did not pay your passage to the Continent."

"He did not." Algernon, bless his heart, had loaned her the money.

Devlin looked taken aback, but recovered quickly. "Who paid for your upkeep in Paris, Julia? Your uncle? I sincerely doubt it."

Tears pricked her eyes. "I had to leave England," she whispered.

"Oh, and why was that?"

Because she'd been unable to face him. Because she'd been a coward. Not able to look at him, she stared past his broad shoulder to the door. "I had to leave you."

A muscle twitched in his jaw. "Why?"

"You...you took everything from me, and I would have given you even more. But you gave nothing in return."

He slapped his fingers one by one. "I offered you jewelry. Clothes. I told you I would look into obtaining a house—"

A strangled sob erupted from her chest. "I never wanted to be your mistress. I never wanted your money. I wanted you, only you!"

For a long moment, they stared at one another mutely.

Confusion, distrust, anger and other emotions she couldn't name raged across his face. Finally he spoke, and his voice was so soft she could hardly hear. "You had me. I thought you knew."

She shook her head, regarding him sadly. "No, Dev. I had nothing."

"What do you mean? I would have given you everything, everything that was mine."

Except his name, of course. Pain rent her heart, sending fissures along its brittle surface. A mere push from him would shatter it into a thousand pieces. It was her own

fault. She should not have allowed him to take her tonight. She should have fought to the death. Here he was again, trying to make her his mistress, and just as he had a year ago, he failed to see the hurt it caused her.

"Not everything that was yours," she whispered. "I am too far beneath you."

"Beneath me?" he sputtered. "What are you talking about?"

She stepped forward. "I loved you, Devlin. Don't you see? I loved you! But you did not love me in return. You wanted my body. You used me. You took away my innocence and then tried to pay me with trinkets. You turned me into a whore."

"I...?"

"But what would happen when I became old and you found another, prettier face? You would leave me, destitute and alone. You would break my heart. You would kill me. I had to leave. I had to save myself from you."

"Julia—"

She stared at him through blurry eyes. "I am better than that, Devlin. I might not be an heiress or the daughter of a peer. I might not have a fat dowry. But I want to be more than a baronet's whore."

His features were still tense, but his voice lowered. He sounded almost bereft. "What are you saying? You'll be a whore for anyone but me? Why, Julia?"

She wrapped her arms around her chest. It hurt so much that he could think such things of her after all they had shared. "I thought you knew me," she whispered. "You're the only one, Devlin. First and only."

He stared at her for a long, aching moment, mouth agape. Then he blinked and his face turned hard.

"You're lying." He spun around, grabbed the lantern and left her alone in the dark, slamming the door behind him.

A key turned. He was locking her in.

Chapter Three

The stables were cold and dark, but as if he sensed his master's mood, Midnight stood wide awake in his stall, stomping his feet and blowing harsh breaths from his nose. Devlin saddled him in silence and led him out to the front gate. Patting Midnight's black mane, he murmured, "I wish I could give you your head, but this is London, boy. We will have to make do."

He rode Midnight down the dimly lit paths in St. James' Park, ignoring the nighttime vagrants who faded in and out of the shadows.

Julia was lying. She had to be. Devlin might have been the first, but he certainly wasn't the only. He knew what she'd done. Everyone in London had heard of her exploits on the Continent.

A year ago, he thought they were of the same mind about their relationship. They were happy together. They were in love. She had seemed content with their arrangement. Then she had left him without explanation and his world had fallen apart.

In that confused, wounded state, it was easy for him to believe everything Clayton had told him. She had left Devlin because he hadn't given her enough. Clayton offered her a thousand pounds and it was still not enough. She was greedy. She wanted more. Just like any lowborn harlot.

A blast of cold air penetrated his clothes and Devlin cringed. When they were together, he'd never thought of her as a harlot, or even as a mistress. He'd thought of her as his precious gem, his shining light. Learning her true nature had nearly driven him mad. How could he have been so wrong about her?

But the look of naked pain on her face tonight had sent chills down his spine. She'd told him he was her first, her only. That she'd loved him, that he had broken her heart.

That he'd turned her into a whore.

No, that couldn't be true.

Midnight's hooves clopped loudly on the cobblestones of St. James and Devlin thought back on their weekly rendezvous—how he'd told her when and where to come to him, how he'd tumble her and then allow his busy, monotonous life to get in the way. He regretted always having to leave her, so he made sure to leave little gifts as small tokens of his affection. The baubles were hardly adequate considering the magnitude of his feelings for her, but he'd wanted to make some gesture to apologize for their too-brief encounters.

He'd never spoken of the future. He'd never made certain she was happy.

As Midnight climbed the gradual slope of St. James' street, Devlin finally saw their relationship from Julia's point of view. Before she knew him, she was innocent. He had taken her, seduced her and molded her into his whore. He had degraded her, ruined her and then expected her to want to remain with him in that tainted state.

She was right—he'd treated her worse than most men of his class treated their mistresses. Whatever had happened between her and Clayton, he'd driven her to it.

"Bloody hell," he muttered to the cold, unforgiving sky.

But how could he forgive her for leaving him for Clayton? How could he forgive her for the scene at the opera?

And after what he'd done tonight, how could he make her believe he loved her, that he always had loved her?

He turned Midnight toward home. There was only one thing he could do—tell her.

In the dim first light of dawn, Devlin returned to the stables and brushed down his horse before going in the house, up the stairs and quietly unlocking her door and slipping inside.

Through the gap in the bed curtains, he saw that she lay asleep on the bed. The sheer size the pillows and blankets towering around her made her appear small and fragile. In the muted light, her eyelashes and brows were dark slashes against the pale

skin of her face. Her lips parted slightly in sleep. One creamy shoulder showed above the blankets. Devlin's pulse quickened. She was naked.

Slowly, he divested himself of all his clothes and piled them on the floor. When he was as naked as she, he went to the bed and looked down at her again.

Devlin was accustomed to getting everything he wanted. He hadn't realized how much he needed her until she was gone. He'd taken her for granted. She had misinterpreted him, but it was his fault. He thought he could show her his love with trinkets and kisses and that would be enough.

He looked down on her fair face. She had deserved so much more than he had given. Now was the time to show her, to tell her. His throat was thick and dry, but he pushed the words out anyway.

"I love you, Julia."

The words came out as a whisper, husky and low. She rolled away from him, still asleep. Sighing, he climbed beside her, his weight shifting the bed and jostling her. Her eyes opened slowly, heavy with sleep, then they widened as they focused on him beside her.

He lay down and took her in his arms. She stiffened.

"Julia, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

But he could not force out the words "I love you" again. The suspicious look in her eyes scared him. What if he sounded foolish or insincere? What if she laughed at him? What if she said it was too late? What if she was lying about Clayton?

He groaned aloud, knowing that his own cowardice and suspicious pride could ruin everything.

But Julia's warm, sleep-heavy body was pressed against him, her breasts soft pads against his chest. To wake up every morning with her sweet body pressed against him like this—it would be heaven. As it extended to a painful length, the tip of his cock pushed against the fine hairs at the top of her mound.

Devlin rolled her to her back and kissed her. She did not resist as she had last night – whether it was because she was still half asleep or more accepting of her fate, he didn't know. But he took full advantage of it, exploring her mouth with his lips and tongue. He'd always loved her lips – they were bow-shaped and cherry pink, a pretty contrast to her pale skin. Taking her plump lower lip between his teeth, he tugged gently and then let her go.

He looked at her face. Her expression was absolutely unreadable. Lust, love, anger, confusion? A combination of all of it? He couldn't be sure. As he watched her, he determined this morning was for her, for her pleasure, not his. Despite the blood thrumming through his cock, he would not fuck her senseless this time. For once, he would give instead of take.

“Let me love you, Julia.”

She didn't answer. But some part of him knew she wouldn't fight it this time.

He moved down her body, licking the creamy slope of one of her breasts until her nipple caught his tongue. Already taut, it stretched into a firm point as he drew it between his lips. Julia moaned. Her fingers twined in his hair and he curled his hand around her other breast, squeezing gently.

She had beautiful breasts, small but plump and tipped with large nipples, just the right size for him to suckle. He rubbed his thumb over the other nipple and her body jerked in response. She was always sensitive here. Gently, he flattened his tongue over the tight bud to soothe any ache he might have caused by his rough suction.

Balancing himself on one forearm, he grasped his cock and slid his palm down to the base, the tips of his fingers skimming his balls. Already his sac was drawn up tight against his body, his seed boiling and ready to explode. He rubbed his fingers over it, wishing he could somehow loosen the tightness. He wanted to give her a little pleasure before he came.

He moved his cock so the tip brushed down her folds in an exploratory journey to test her readiness. Julia made a little squeak and her body convulsed as he stroked her

clit, but he pressed lower to tease her opening. He nearly smiled as a coat of her smooth cream covered his cock head.

Yes. Another thing that made her so special. She was always ready for him. Always.

He grasped the center of his cock so that he'd have total control over its movement, and slid up to her clit again. He circled, brushed and teased, watching her beautiful body arch and open. The head of his cock was sensitive enough to feel her little nub as it filled with blood, engorging enough to peek out from its hood. By this time, Julia was gasping openly, her legs spread wider to give him better access, wiggling against him with every stroke of his cock.

The proximity of his rod to her tight passage made him wild with the desire to thrust deep into her, to pound her like he had earlier. To feel her channel contracting and pulsing around him...

No! He nearly shouted it. Not now. Not until she asked for it first, begged for it.

Instead he pumped himself as he stroked her, watching her face slowly open as it transformed with lust. The harsh press of his hand on his rod, her taut clit brushing against his sensitive head, her mewling sounds. He felt his own come gathering beneath his fingers, sprinting to the head of his cock for release. The base of his spine was on fire with the need to come. He loosened his hold and ground his teeth, tangled his fingers in her hair and fought it.

Not yet. Not yet. Not yet.

He rubbed Julia's clit over and over, until her teeth clenched and her limbs straightened. He kissed her, licked the shell of her ear and finally pushed his face into the pillow, using all his willpower to prevent himself from moving his cock lower, thrusting inside her and letting go. He felt her body, from toes to face, harden beneath him. Then, with a gush of fluid newly coating his slick cock, she came.

As soon as he felt her release, he tightened his hold on his cock, jerking powerfully, once, twice, three times, and he came with her. His seed spurted all over her swollen clit and down the slick folds of her pussy, his body shuddering, open and vulnerable.

I love you, Julia.

Damn it to hell. He still couldn't say it.

He loved this woman. He would make her his, all his, no matter what it took. But how could he control whether she loved him back? How could he risk his pride if she didn't return his feelings?

He held her in his arms until he felt her body relax and return to slumber. Just as the morning glow began to edge past the boards nailed to the window, he went downstairs to wait for the inevitable.

* * * * *

Devlin sat stiffly in his breakfast room. Sunlight had somehow managed to pierce the fog and now cut through the opening in the curtains and glared across his chestnut table, blinding him. Whittle served him breakfast, but he just moved it around on the plate.

When Julia had gazed at him after he'd made love to her this morning, the wariness had not disappeared from her eyes. She did not trust him, would probably never trust him again.

His stomach compressed hard and tight. He drank his coffee, but it tasted bitter and scorched his throat. Stabbing a piece of ham, he rammed it into his mouth and moved his jaw. Chewing leather would be as satisfying.

Someone rapped on his front door.

He knew who it was—Julia's male companions from the previous evening, come to search for her, to demand her release, to save her from the devil with the pistol. It had certainly taken them long enough. He raised his head and met Whittle's questioning gaze.

"Open it," he growled. "And invite them in for some coffee."

Whittle disappeared only to return moments later, leading the two men from the night before. Devlin looked at them more closely than he had last night. One was thin

and tall, the other stocky and short. Both were dressed impeccably and, strangely enough, in matching fabrics.

Devlin rose to greet them. "Good morning, gentlemen. Please take a seat. I'm short of servants at the moment, so all I can offer is coffee."

The men hovered at the door. Then the taller—a blond-haired chap—walked haltingly inside. "Where's Julia?" he asked, clearly trying to sound authoritative, yet his eyes flicked nervously around the room.

"She's upstairs." Devlin kept his voice mild. "Sleeping."

The stocky man moved beside the blond-haired man, standing just a hair closer to him than would have been completely proper. "Bring her to us, sir, and we will be on our way."

Again, Devlin looked them over. They were well-mannered and impeccably dressed, yet they didn't have the demeanor of men he'd expect to engage in a threesome with a high-priced courtesan. Remembering that looks could deceive, Devlin cracked his lips into a false smile. "No. She won't be going anywhere."

"I have already contacted the constable," the blond man blustered. "You've kidnapped an innocent woman!"

Devlin sank back into his chair and patted his mouth with a napkin. "Not to worry, gentlemen. I have not kidnapped her. Now if you would be so kind as to tell me your names—"

"You certainly did kidnap her!" the swarthy fellow exclaimed. "Now we insist you return her to us. At once!"

Devlin held up a hand, covering the seething rage inside of him with poise—something he was well accustomed to doing when he faced people he distrusted or disliked. Still, he'd hardly ever come face-to-face with two men he disliked more than these two, if only because they had touched Julia. He spoke calmly. "Please let us speak like civilized human beings. First of all, I should like to know your names. Secondly, I would like to know your intentions with my...with Miss Beaumont."

The blond gritted his teeth, still refusing to take the proffered seat. "I am Algernon Ayers. Julia is my cousin. This is my companion, Thomas Jones. We were escorting her home last night when you so...so *villainously* abducted her."

"Julia's cousin!" Devlin slumped deeper into his chair, unable to hide his relief. "I thought...I thought..."

One thing was for certain—he was the world's biggest ass.

"Listen," Ayers said, stepping closer, "I don't care a whit what you thought. All I want is my cousin back, safe and sound. I will do whatever it takes to ensure her safety."

Devlin gazed up at the man, impressed by his show of loyalty. He remembered Julia talking fondly about a cousin who'd gone into trade despite her haughty uncle's objections. Was this the man she spoke of with such admiration?

He narrowed his eyes at Ayers and took a leap of faith. "Even sacrifice her happiness?"

"What do you mean by that?" Ayers snapped.

"Julia is safe and sound with me. She wants to be here."

"Do you truly expect us to believe that after the show you put on last night?" Jones said in an angry voice.

"I was incensed," Devlin said with a shrug. "You would be too, in my position."

Ayers folded his arms over his chest. "In your position?"

Devlin glanced from one of the men to the other. If his interpretation was correct, these two were lovers. Amazing he hadn't seen it last night. But then, his focus had been entirely upon Julia.

"Yes," he said slowly. "What would you do if your paramour went to the Continent and you heard rumors of her fucking every Englishman more rich and more powerful than yourself?"

Ayers spoke through pursed lips. "I would verify whether those rumors were true before jumping to conclusions."

Devlin leapt up so quickly that both men stepped backward. "Are you saying I was imagining things? I saw her with Clayton. I saw her turn her back on me and climb into the man's carriage."

Two spots of red appeared high on Ayers' cheeks. "Perhaps, but how could you make any assumptions about her relationship with Clayton?"

"I know that man," Devlin spat. "He's a lecher and a debauched pervert."

Ayers was so angry now, it seemed he had forgotten his nerves. "How could Julia know that? Did you tell her? Did anyone? How could you know what happened once she arrived on the Continent? She didn't know any better—she was a sheltered, innocent girl and Clayton followed her, leading her to believe he was a friend. Then he tried to rape her. She escaped, barely, then struggled to find odd jobs to stay alive until I found her living in a hovel on a Paris alley and brought her home."

"Oh God." Devlin sank back into the chair. "Oh God."

But Ayers was not finished. He stepped forward again and placed his hands flat on the breakfast table, his blue eyes feverishly bright. "I know all about you, Vaughn. Julia is more than a cousin to me, more than even a sister. She loved you and you betrayed her." He stabbed his finger at Devlin. "You ruined her life. You bastard. I would call you out if I wasn't sensible enough to know it would be the end of me. But if you do not hand her over to me right now, I will call every constable in London to your door."

The truth wound Devlin's jealous rage into knots of tension in his shoulders, neck and stomach. And his heart, which he had thought shredded and in pieces, now hung dully in his chest like a dead weight, almost too heavy to bear.

He was a brute, a mindless cur. He didn't deserve her. She would never forgive him for what he had done.

He hated himself.

"I'll go find her," Jones said, turning toward the door.

Devlin raised a hand "Wait." His voice sounded like it had been scraped over broken glass. "Don't go. I have to...to explain."

Jones shook his head. "I can't see what you possibly could explain, Vaughn. You've ruined a young woman. We are trying to help her have a decent life, and yet you seem determined to destroy it again."

"No," Devlin said, his voice barely a whisper. "No."

"What, then?"

"I want to do right by her," Devlin said. The moment of truth had arrived. The first true step in his repentance, the first step in proving himself. "I...love her."

Both men's jaws dropped. They stared at him.

"I love her," he whispered.

* * * * *

Dim light filtered through the cracks in the planks covering the window when Julia awoke to the sound of a key rattling in the lock. She crouched among the cashmere pillows, poised to sprint, but the door cracked open just enough for a plate of eggs and toast and a steaming cup to appear before it clicked shut.

She lay back in the bed, remembering how Dev had come to her early this morning. He'd teased her into a climax so intense she'd nearly fainted. She must have lost consciousness soon afterward. In fact, if not for the stickiness of his seed between her legs, she'd be certain it was a dream.

Did he truly plan to keep her here, coming in to allay his lust whenever the mood struck? For how long would he continue doing this? And above all, why would he keep her by force when he could surely find a more beautiful and more willing mistress? Or was it "bed slave"? She sighed deeply. She didn't even know what she was to him anymore. All she knew was that those were roles she would never accept. So why had she been so passive this morning, so accepting?

He had apologized, she remembered. She'd never before heard him apologize to anyone about anything.

Still, he was keeping her locked in a room against her will, relieving his lust on her. She couldn't let this happen again.

Clambering out of the high bed, she took the cup of coffee in hand and searched the room, checking every nook and cranny to find something to aid in her escape. Pausing at the window, the most obvious portal out of this prison, she studied the planks of wood covering the glass. Someone had nailed them to the windowsill, but if she could yank one of them out, she might be able to use it as a makeshift crowbar on the others.

She ran her fingers along the edges of each plank and tried to pull the nails free of the sill. The fourth plank wobbled when she pulled it and seemed to give a bit when she tugged it harder. Encouraged, she set her coffee on the floor, grabbed the plank with both hands, propped one foot against the wall for leverage and yanked with all her might. It gave a little more. She repeated the process until, with a loud screech, one side of the board came free and a shaft of muted sunlight streamed into the room.

Squinting, she pulled on the edge of the board and looked out. A vast carpet of ice-encrusted grass spread from beneath her window. Latticed beams ran along this side of the house, supporting the thick branches of what appeared to be an enormous dormant climbing rose. If she could get through the window, she could easily climb down.

She craned her neck to look further. A round drive curved toward the front door, but at this angle, she could not see its end. She heard a faint clatter and a slam and then she saw a familiar carriage pull away from the house and head toward the street.

Julia's skin prickled. Algernon and Thomas! Why would they leave without her?

"Help! Help! Please help me!" she screamed, pounding on the windowpane. But the carriage rattled along, its driver and occupants oblivious to her shouts, and passed through Devlin's wrought iron gates, turning onto the street just beyond.

She rested her forehead on the sill, heaving great, panicked breaths. She had to get away.

With a desperate yank, she tore the plank off the window.

Chapter Four

The sun hung low on the horizon when Julia heard the key turning the lock again. She had planned for this eventuality and placed each board carefully back into position after she'd torn it from the wall. She'd only succeeded in getting three of the blasted planks off and her fingers were red and full of splinters, but she thought one more would be enough to allow her to open the double-hung window and squeeze her body through.

She quickly set the plank into the wall, hanging it loosely on the nails she had pulled out. She would have to keep Dev away from here—if he touched any of the boards, they'd fall.

She hurried to the center of the room, smoothing her skirts with stinging hands.

Dev came in, swept a dark, smoky gaze over her body that made her tremble from her crown to her toes and held out his hand. "Follow me."

"Where are we going?"

He gave her a look which, if she had not known better, she might have called contrite. "To my bedchamber. I have drawn a bath for you. You must feel...soiled, after the... After everything."

She drew her lip between her teeth. What accounted for his new demeanor? "Did my companions come for me?"

He dropped his hand. "They did."

"Where are they? What lies did you tell them?"

A muscle worked in his jaw. "They are gone."

She felt a desperate, welling panic. "But they wouldn't just leave me here! What did you tell them, Dev?"

"I made them a promise."

"A promise? What kind of a promise? And how could they possibly believe you?"

"I convinced them I was sincere."

Sincere? She shook her head at him, confused.

He raked his hand through his dark hair and then held it out to her again. "Come with me, Julia."

She didn't have a choice. She brushed past him, ignoring the proffered hand, and marched toward his bedchamber. She knew where it was.

His suite of rooms was more familiar than her little prison. The connecting chambers smelled of Devlin, of sandalwood and musky male, and she could not resist flicking her gaze past the furnishings upholstered in silver and black damask to his bed, where they had lain together so many afternoons, laughing and talking and making love.

He followed her in and closed the door behind her. "I will serve as your lady's maid."

Imagining him lacing her corset, combing out her hair and pinning it up in some elaborate coiffure nearly made her laugh, but instead she nodded. "Very well."

Then she realized he'd be close. Very close. Touching her, watching her bathe. She drew in a breath. "But I shall undress myself."

He nodded and lowered himself onto the striped divan near the tub. "Proceed."

She kicked off her shoes and knelt to remove her stockings. "How long do you plan to keep me here?"

"Forever."

Startled, Julia looked up. "You cannot, Devlin. I have work—"

"At Ayers' tailoring shop. I know, Julia. I'm sorry, but I can't allow you to be in trade."

She shook her head. He wasn't making any sense. "I cannot stay with you."

"Why?"

She dug her toes into the lush Turkish carpet. "Because—" She swallowed and tried again. "Because men like you are all the same." To keep her shaking hands occupied, she removed her garters. "You keep women until you tire of them and then you discard them."

She felt his gaze moving down her leg as she rolled a stocking to her ankle.

"Do you think I would have put you out on the street?"

Staring at her bared calf, she said, "If you had cast me off, it would have killed me."

His voice was low, dangerous. "So you cast me off instead?"

"I will not be anyone's mistress. Not ever again. I was naïve to have let you..." Her breath hitched, but she let it out, slow and controlled. "I am sovereign over my own body and will remain so until I die."

He rose, pinning her with his dark gaze. "Like you were sovereign over your body last night? This morning?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "How dare you?"

"Do not tell me you hated it." He stepped close enough that she felt the heat coming from his body. She wanted that heat to wrap around her, to warm her.

She opened her mouth, but she couldn't lie to him. Just the mention of him possessing her made her want to beg to be possessed once again.

He brushed his fingers lightly over her lips, then covered her shoulders with his hands, turned her around and began to unbutton her gown.

He moved slowly, steadily working the buttons. She hadn't been able to reach them all and had found it nearly impossible to line them up properly this morning, but he did not comment on her disarray.

She squeezed her eyes shut. When he seduced her this time, she must resist, no matter what her body wanted. Nevertheless, her wicked flesh ignored her righteous anger, her indignation at being kidnapped and forced into carnal fulfillment. It did not

want to resist him. His nearness heightened her senses. Her heartbeat thrummed in anticipation. She imagined him running his big hands over her body like he had this morning, over her waist and thighs and breasts, softly scraping her sensitive skin with his calloused fingers. He'd curl his hand around her buttocks and lift her, then push her down onto his thick cock. She'd ride him hard, fast, feeling him stroke the deepest parts of her.

Her gown slipped off her shoulders. She stepped out of it, now wearing only her chemise and drawers.

She turned to face him, clasping her hands together behind her so he would not see the raw skin on her palms. His gaze slid over her body, lingering on her nipples, which bunched tight against the thin linen.

She wanted to touch him. To explore the hard ridges of his chest, run her hands over his taut behind, tangle her hands in his thick, dark, curly hair.

Desire pulsed through her body, centering between her legs in a slow, simmering fire. Her fingers itched to touch herself, to cool the building heat.

She had never stopped wanting him. Not once, not for one second. During those long, lonely nights in Paris, she had dreamed of him, of his wide mouth closing over her breast, his thick cock invading her mouth, his long fingers thrusting into her core. She'd awakened shaking with lust and trembling with need. Her body had ached to be filled by him. She'd used her fingers to allay the ache, but her own fingers were nothing compared to him. Nothing.

She spun away, reaching down to pull the chemise over her head, then shimmying off her drawers. Fully naked, she took a step toward the bath, wishing she could run to it, that somehow the water would hide her wantonness.

"Stop, Julia."

She stopped, but a voice in her mind screamed, *Don't stop! Run! Hide!*

"Look at me."

Slowly, she turned to face him, raising her eyes. Her nipples jutted proudly, exposing her lust.

He moved toward her, reaching out to her. Fighting not to move into his arms, she squeezed her fists at her sides.

He cupped her cheek and stroked his thumb over her cheekbone. His touch was warm, smooth, like melted chocolate. "Is that why you left? To become sovereign over your own body?"

"Yes," she whispered.

His fingers tensed minutely. "You shunned me publicly. You made me a laughingstock."

Julia remembered the crowd of onlookers as she and Lord Clayton had strode away from him. She remembered how he had shouted at her, begged her to stop. She closed her eyes. "I am sorry. I did not mean for any of that to happen."

The effort she had made to leave him in person had failed miserably. Feeling weak and cowardly and at a loss as to how she could call it off, she'd ignored his summons for the following weeks. She met and befriended Lord Clayton when he'd come to visit her uncle, and he'd invited them to the opera—to lift her spirits, he'd said, though she hadn't told him why she was sad. At the time, she'd thought the gesture so kind. Devlin's presence there had stunned her—she didn't know how to react. And then he gave her no choice but to make things between them patently, publicly clear.

Her uncle, waiting in the carriage, had heard enough to deduce exactly what had happened. The atmosphere in the carriage was strained, but he held himself in check as long as the viscount was near. As soon as Lord Clayton left them, he raged at her. He called her a whore, a failure, an embarrassment to her family. Then he threw her out. Wanting nothing more than to be as far away from London as possible, she'd gone to Algie, told him everything and begged for the funds to cross the channel.

Now Devlin stood before her, close enough to touch. Every nerve in her body reached out to him, ached to move into his embrace, but her few remaining wits held her back.

"You are so beautiful."

She fought to find her voice. "But someday I will not be."

"You will always be beautiful to me. It is not in your youth that I see your beauty, Julia. It is in *you*."

"I wish I believed you."

"What could I do to make you believe?"

"Nothing," she responded instantly, then immediately regretted it. For some reason it sounded cruel.

He released his hold on her cheek and stepped back. She moved with him, slipped her arms around his waist and rested her forehead on his chest, angling her head downward. His arousal pushed against his trousers, thick and heavy.

She wanted him one last time before she escaped. She wanted him to drive her hard, to entrench himself within her every cell. Many years from now, when she was old and alone, she wanted to savor the memory of it.

Gently, he pushed her away. "Take your bath, Julia."

She blinked up at him, bewildered. His eyes narrowed and his mouth set in a tight line. Tension radiated from his body.

He jerked his chin at the tub. "Go on. Take your bath."

But you want me! She could see it, smell it. Why wasn't he taking her? He had never hesitated before. For the first time in his presence, she felt the sting of rejection.

But this was what she had wanted in a way, wasn't it? For him to see her as something beyond an object of lust.

She turned toward the tub and stepped in. The water was warm, comforting. She sank into it and scrubbed her body with the soap he handed her. He watched silently,

scrutinizing her every move, taking in the most private parts of her body and trailing paths of heat along her skin everywhere his gaze touched. When she sank her head into the water, he went behind the claw-foot tub and with sure, gentle fingers, washed her hair.

Without saying a word, Dev helped her out of the tub and used a thick towel to dry her. He lingered over her heavy breasts and smoothed around her nipples as if they were made of the most delicate crystal. Julia had to bite her lip to keep from gasping as the gentle touches seemed to travel beneath her skin, making her core clench and her legs threaten to buckle. He dropped to his knees, swiping the towel over the flare of her hips, then over her thighs, nudging them apart before raising questioning eyes. Dev asking permission? She never would have conceived of such a thing.

Hesitantly, she widened her stance and with just the slightest hint of a smile curving his lips, he rubbed the slick flesh between her legs. When he passed over her clit, she gasped and her knees buckled but he was quick enough to grasp her waist so she wouldn't fall.

Julia's confusion soared along with her lust. Trembling, she gripped his shoulders and watched him. His eyes narrowed with intensity and focused on his task. His chest rose and fell with deep breaths. He was aroused, but he made no move to try to claim her.

"Dev," she whispered as he dropped her chemise over her head. The linen felt wrong against her skin, scratchy and uncomfortable. Only Dev could soothe her, Dev's skin against her skin, the weight of his big body on her, covering her. He was the only remedy for her ache.

He gathered her gown, stockings, shoes and drawers in one hand and arched an eyebrow at her. "Yes?"

"What are you doing?"

"I am serving as a lady's maid. A rather poor one, I'm afraid." The sincerity of his tone masked a rare hint of roguish humor.

She wanted to strip off her chemise and beg him to take her again. She wanted to go down to her knees and take him into her mouth. She should want neither after what he had done to her, what he wanted to do to her.

Against her will, her hand had already tugged her chemise up to her hip. She forcibly relaxed her fingers and the chemise dropped back to her knees. She twisted her lips into a taut smile. "I thank you for your efforts."

"I will return you to your room." He held the door open and she walked past him and through it, burning with the desire to have him once more, drowning in uncertainty. He was a man who knew what he wanted and took it. Always, without fail. What was he playing at?

Entering the room behind her, he said, "Your supper will be up shortly. Is there anything else I can get you?"

He meant to leave her here, alone. Without taking her to bed. Shock muted her for a long moment. Finally she murmured, "No, nothing else, thank you."

He stared at her in a most unnerving way. She stood in the center of the room, feeling the hair prickle on the back of her neck.

She was a fool. Here she was again, sinking into the fairytale. She closed her eyes, forcing herself to remember that last afternoon in the inn.

Very nice, he had said just before walking away, leaving her naked and alone. *I left a little something for you on the table.*

It was better this way. Making love with him would only make it worse, wouldn't it? There was no future for them.

"Goodnight, Julia." Devlin slipped out the door, closing and locking it behind him.

This was not the life she wanted. If she was to love a man, she wanted a husband who would stand beside her for the rest of her life.

She turned to the window.

* * * * *

Devlin had paced his drawing room so much today he feared he had worn a trail on the carpet. He poured himself a glass of whisky and tossed it back in one burning gulp. He poured another and set about pacing again.

Ayers had explained everything to him.

After a difficult year on the Continent, struggling to make ends meet by sewing for various tailors, she had returned to England to work in Ayers' fashionable shop. From what he had told Devlin, she was an extraordinarily skillful and creative seamstress.

He grunted, sank into his armchair and stared moodily into the fire. He had promised her cousin that he'd do right by her, but he had botched things so terribly, he didn't know how to fix them, how she would ever forgive him for what he'd done.

Today he had tried to show her that he cared for her, that he could be gentle and kind without throwing her into bed. He'd tried to apologize to her through action, but it had been awkward. He was a big, clumsy oaf. He didn't know how to treat her when he was not bedding her, and his discomfort had clearly shone through. All throughout their encounter, she had looked upon him with wariness and distrust.

How could he regain her trust?

Ayers had told him she became too attached to him. She'd loved him desperately and feared that he did not love her in return, so she had escaped to France to avoid the inevitable heartbreak. Then she had struggled to remain chaste, which, given her ruined reputation and her defection to Paris, must have taken a superhuman will. Her actions showed her strength, her innate morality.

How could he have been so stupid? He had thought only of himself, not of her soft nature, of her reputation, her dreams and aspirations. He had thought she understood how much she affected him, how deeply he had fallen. They had spent so much intimate time together—happy and companionable, sometimes rough, sometimes gentle, always affectionate. But he had never once told her with words how strongly he felt. He had merely lived in the joy of the present and thought she had too.

She had left him because she feared losing him, because she feared becoming a whore, because she feared dying poor and alone. Because she loved him.

Of course she believed he did not love her. What reason had he ever given her to think otherwise?

He finished the whisky and this time grabbed the entire decanter instead of pouring himself another glass.

Goddamn it all. His head ached with guilt. He was a churl. She deserved so much better than him.

And yet he could not let her go. His need for her had nearly killed him this afternoon when she had pushed herself, naked, into his arms. It had nearly driven him mad as he had watched her bathe, watched her rub the soap over her body, so seductive yet seemingly unaware of how she affected him.

No, he would not let her get away from him again. But how could he convince her that he wanted her forever? How could he make her believe in him, trust him?

The whisky wrapped itself around his nerves, smoothing them, gently opening the path toward a solution. He tilted his head back and let his eyelids drop, leaving the drink to its subtle work.

The answer came to him all at once. He rose, set the decanter on the side table and felt his lips twist into a smile. He knew what he had to give her. The one item he kept that actually meant something to him. If he offered it to her, if he explained what it meant, she would understand.

It was so easy. Why hadn't he thought of it sooner?

He dashed up to his dressing room and yanked open his armoire, searching its depths until he found a small box he hadn't touched for many years. It opened with a screech of rusted hinges. He rummaged around inside and before long he found what he was looking for. He tested it in his hand, feeling its weight before stuffing it into his pocket.

He sprinted to her room, turned the key in the lock and opened the door.

A blast of cold evening air greeted him. Moonlight streamed through the open window.

She was gone.

Chapter Five

Julia set the kettle over the fire. She would call on Algernon after tea to let him know that she was safe. She was also blazing with curiosity as to what he had discussed with Dev, what Dev could have possibly told him to make him abandon his rescue.

It had only been a day since she'd escaped from his house. She didn't understand the complex internal workings of Dev's mind, but she wouldn't survive another intimate encounter with the man. He hadn't found her yet, but it seemed inevitable. She wasn't safe here. All she could do was to appeal to her cousin for help.

She took the boiling water off the fire and poured it over a bit of tea. Tea was expensive, but Algernon had given her some for Christmas and she felt like indulging today. Grasping her cup in both of her still-sore hands, she sank into her only chair, an old Queen Anne with a velvet cushion—a relic from Algernon's attic.

A door creaked downstairs.

Julia froze with her teacup halfway to her mouth and then set it down, reminding herself to breathe. That couldn't be Dev. He didn't have a key. It had to be Algernon coming to work on the books or finish a design for an important client. A part of her relaxed, relieved, but another part cried out in agony for something that could not be.

It could not be. She wanted him in a different way than he wanted her.

She stood, brushed off her skirts and went down to greet Algernon.

As she neared the bottom of the stairway, a large, dark figure turned into the back hall. He reeled to a halt in the doorway, looking up at her. She stopped in her tracks, three steps up from the bottom.

Devlin.

Julia's heart lodged firmly in her throat. She could scarcely breathe.

He swept off his hat and dragged a hand through his tousled black hair. "Julia."

"How did you get in?" she whispered.

"Your cousin loaned me this." He raised the key in his hand. At the horrified look that must have shown on her face, he added, "It was quite by choice. I did not have to pummel him to get it."

She shook off her disbelief and clasped her arms around herself, fighting a bone-deep shudder, fighting the urge to turn and run. But there was nowhere to go. Devlin would not stop until he turned her into his whore. And worse, infinitely worse, a part of her wanted to be his whore. She dug her fingers into her upper arms.

"You have to leave."

"Not until we talk."

Oh God. What on earth could he want to talk about? What was left? "We have nothing to say to one another. I cannot be with you. I am sorry."

"No. I am the one who is sorry. For all of it." He swept his hand in a grand, encompassing gesture.

She shook her head. How could he possibly understand his effect on her?

"But most of all," he swallowed hard and his voice dropped down to a rasping whisper, "I am sorry for using you, Julia."

She clutched the banister. "Please. You must leave."

Please, please leave. Last night he had left her hot and throbbing for him, and now, the honesty of the pained expression on his face opened a deep, aching void in her heart.

"I cannot let you go," he said softly.

"Please, Dev." She stared at her feet, too afraid to look at him, to see the intensity in his eyes, his strong hands clenched at his sides.

"I have to have you."

"No—"

"I need you with me."

"I cannot."

"You are no whore, Julia. I was wrong."

Her head snapped up. "You don't really believe that."

"I do. I understand everything now."

"You want to use me again," she whispered, "to make me your mistress. And when you tire of me, you will leave me."

He set his hat on the side table opposite the foot of the stairs and moved toward her, his hands open, his palms facing upward in a gesture of supplication.

"No. I was wrong. What I said to you, what I did. I will never tire of you, Little Pearl. I love you."

Her knuckles turned white on the banister. "Love?" She mouthed the word, for she could not say it aloud.

"When you left me, I thought—" His voice broke, turned ragged. "I thought you did not care for me. You nearly killed me, Julia."

Her knees turned to water. But he was there on the step with her, his arms around her, holding her up, stroking her lower back beneath her muslin gown. He stared into her face, so close her skin prickled from his heat.

"I thought about you hundreds of times a day, every day, for the past year. I thought you used me for my money. I thought Clayton offered you more and that was why you went with him. I thought you betrayed me, Julia, and it hurt so much... I loved you so much." He drew in a shaky breath.

"Oh Devlin."

"I could not live like that. It made me crazy thinking you were with other men when I wanted you so badly, when I offered you my heart and my soul."

"But you didn't—" she began.

He pressed his fingers to her lips. "I am not good with words, Julia. I thought you knew. You saw me at...when I was most vulnerable...in ways nobody else did, and I thought you knew the power you had over me."

She shook her head helplessly.

"I heard you sold your beautiful body to other men, and it infuriated me. I wanted to make you mine. I wanted—needed—you beside me. I wanted to keep you with me, and since I knew you wouldn't come willingly, I felt like I had no choice but to force it upon you."

She caressed his big shoulders through his coat.

"I was a fool to let you go," he said. "I made assumptions. I was wrong."

"Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you give me a sign?"

"I did not know how a man should treat the woman he loved. I thought the money would be enough. I thought the lovemaking would be enough."

She pressed her cheek to his chest. "I needed you to say it. I needed to believe it."

"I love you." He drew back and kissed her lips, her cheek, her temple. "I always have. I always will."

All of Julia's resistance fled. She no longer cared what happened tomorrow or beyond. There was only this moment, with Devlin holding her, caressing her, finally saying what she had never imagined to hear.

He loved her.

He grasped her face in his hands, angling her head up to his, rubbing the pads of his thumbs over her cheeks. "I am no good with words. Let me show you how much I love you."

She stared into his tormented eyes and knew she could not deny him, she could never deny him. Her pride had vanished and her soul inexorably twisted with his. She would be his mistress and she didn't care that the world would think her a whore. She

would do whatever it took to be with him for as long as he would have her. "Show me, Devlin."

He brushed his lips over hers in a soft, long stroke. "Tell me you will have me."

"Yes."

He dropped his hands to her shoulders and pulled her body tightly against him.

"Please...tell me you won't leave me again."

"Never."

"I've got to have you," he gritted. "I can't wait. Please say yes, Julia."

She looked up at him—at his taut cheeks, his blazing eyes, his clenched teeth—and knew he hung on to the merest thread of control. Her voice was hardly above a whisper. "Yes."

"Tell me I can take you in every way, in any way I want."

The demand shot flames right into her core. She rocked against his hard body. "Yes. Yes. Please."

She leaned forward and swiped her tongue over his lips, then sucked his lower lip between her teeth. Her hands roamed over his torso, exploring its rippling strength through all the layers of his clothing.

He parted her lips with his tongue, then thrust in, claiming her mouth, demanding her submission. Heat poured through Julia like a fluid key, opening all the parts of her body she had tried to keep locked from him.

Suddenly he pulled away, holding her around the neck with one hand and at the small of her back with the other.

"Sit."

He lowered her onto one of the steps and went down on his knees before her, his eyes narrow and intent.

"Lift your skirts. Let me see you."

Shuddering, she lifted them and opened her legs wide, exposing herself. She hadn't yet dressed for going out and she was still bare beneath her chemise.

"You are an angel." He moved in, his breath licking her thighs. "I want to taste you, Julia."

"Yes. Please." She raised her hips off the step as he brought his head down, covering her with his mouth.

He grasped her waist and explored her, slowly moving his tongue along her folds, down to her opening, circling it with gentle care then dipping inside. Sensation flooded her. She closed her eyes, tilted her head back and gave herself over to it.

Beads of sweat broke out over her chest and at her temples. He gave a long, husky purr and the sound resonated through her body, bunching her nerves. Her leg muscles clenched and straightened.

His mouth moved higher and his hand took over the invasion. He worked her with two fingers, stroking her from the inside as his tongue fluttered over her. Julia moaned and he withdrew his slick fingers, moving them downward, circling the tight ring of her anus.

She stiffened.

"I want all of you Julia," he murmured, stroking her, staring up at her.

She whimpered. If she spoke, she might jump out of her overcharged skin.

"You want this. I know you do. Let me in, Julia. Let me possess you."

Yes! She had agreed to let him take her in any way. And he was right, she did want him to possess her in every way. She always had.

"Yes," she managed to whisper.

She closed her eyes and focused on relaxing as the tip of his finger pressed inside. A small bite, then pressure, and a deep quiver rippled through her body, radiating outward over her arms and legs.

He rounded his lips over her clit and sucked hard, pulling her into his mouth. The last residual struggle melted inside her, her muscles opened and she lifted her hips higher and spread her legs wider, pushing his face and his fingers deeper into her.

He thrust his thumb into her cunt and pumped his digits into her simultaneously. Julia's desire raged and coiled tighter and she arched and twisted, squirming to get away, but at the same time reaching for more. He trapped her, held her, forced himself even deeper and shoved her over the edge. He absorbed her movements, stretching the quivering pulses into long, slow drags until she finally collapsed in a boneless heap on the steps.

He kissed her, stroked her gently, slowly moving his caresses down her thigh and then emerging over her, looking down at her through hooded eyes.

"Tell me you love me," he rasped.

"I love you." She gazed up at him and nearly wept. Love seemed an inadequate description for her feelings at this moment.

"Tell me you want me." His eyes were dark, intent.

"I want you."

"Forever."

"Yes. Forever." She wouldn't survive any other way.

In an instant he rose to his feet and gathered her in his arms, carrying her easily up the stairs. "I am taking you to bed."

She closed her eyes, reveling in the feel of his powerful arms holding her but embarrassed by her lack of finery. "You won't find my bed acceptable, Dev."

He bent to kiss her forehead. "It will do."

In her room, the fire had burnt to embers and her tea sat untouched upon her small table. He knelt down and set her gently on the bed, which was nothing more than a small cot pushed against the wall.

"It is yours. It smells like you. It is perfect," he said, running his hands over her tattered quilt. "When you come to live with me, I want you to bring it along."

She laughed, feeling freer in her own skin than she could remember ever having felt, thinking of her little cot sitting beside the grand furniture in his Mayfair home. "You are too kind, Sir Devlin."

Their gazes tangled and held.

"I want you naked," he said.

"I want you naked too."

They stripped one another slowly, peeling off layers of clothing, exploring each new bit of revealed flesh with their tongues and fingers. The only item Dev took care with was his greatcoat, which he draped neatly over her chair. The rest, including her gown, petticoat, corset and chemise ended scattered across the floor planking.

As she unbuttoned his shirt, he caught her hand. She curled it into a fist, but he gently forced her fingers open. One by one, he kissed her raw fingertips. "You're hurt."

"It is nothing," she whispered.

"I'm sorry." His hand tightened over hers. "I don't ever want to hurt you again."

"I did this to myself. Not because you hurt me, but because I was afraid you might."

"I won't. I swear it, Julia."

She leaned forward and kissed his chest, then pulled the shirt over his head.

His trousers came off last. She knelt before him, slowly unbuttoning the flap, her heart hammering against her rib cage. She should be cold, for it was a dismal day outside and the fire was out. But lust pulsed heat through her veins. She slipped the final button free and took his heavy cock into her hands.

If she was hot, he was boiling.

She touched her tongue to the clear bead of fluid on the tip of his shaft, then turned her face to stroke its blazing length along her cheek as she watched expressions of pleasure cross over his face.

"You are so marvelous," she murmured.

He gave her a bemused look and braced one hand on the wall. "Am I?"

"Oh yes. You are so solid, like marble, but velvet soft at the same time. And when you are inside me," she licked from base to head, "you stroke me in places I never knew existed."

Devlin groaned. She wrapped her lips around him. His thickness tested her mouth's limits, but she forced herself to open wider, stretching so he could fill her. Slowly she moved her lips down until he pushed against the back of her throat. Even more slowly, she pulled back, swirling her tongue over him as she did.

"Julia," he growled. "I have to be inside you."

Trailing little kisses down the length of his cock, she murmured, "Yes," and turned away to climb on the bed.

"Stop," he ground out.

Julia froze on her hands and knees, then looked back over her shoulder at him. His gaze was riveted to her. From this angle, he would be able to see all of her. It reminded her of that day long ago, the last time she'd seen him at the inn. She'd been on her forearms and knees, her back arched. His hands had covered her behind and he'd called her pretty, before he'd taken her with his mouth.

She felt herself throbbing, knew she was dripping wet, her folds red and swollen, aching to be penetrated.

"Tilt your arse higher into the air, love," he whispered, watching her intently, one hand sliding up and down his shaft.

She did as she was told, leaning down onto her forearms and propping it as high as she could.

He quoted himself almost to the word. "Such a pretty sight."

Julia smiled as he dropped to his knees behind her, rubbing his cock against her. One of his hands stroked along her back and waist, moving up to smooth over her breast and tug at her nipple, sending a jolt of liquid lust straight through her. She cried out and thrust backward, embracing the length of his shaft between her cheeks.

He moved his cock down, over her tight hole, past her cunt. Back and forth he stroked until her every breath caught and released in a little moan.

All Julia wanted was to be open for him, for him to shove himself deep inside her. "Please, Devlin," she moaned again and again, arching her back, wiggling, trying to force him in. "Oh, please, *please*."

Finally he slid the head of his cock into position at her cunt.

"Yes," she murmured. "Yes. *Now*."

Ever-so slowly, the invasion began. He tunneled into her inch by inch, each little push stretching her wide, building sensation until she thought she would tear down the walls with her need. When she couldn't bear any more, he pushed himself in deeper, touching her womb, and she shuddered. Then he dragged himself out, grazing every sensitive nerve, and the delicious torture began all over again.

His heat sizzled inside her. The exquisite agony of being taken, of Devlin driving in and out of her, his hands on her waist yanking her body against his own, nearly drowned her. Nothing in the world existed beyond their powerful connection, loosening and then tightening and solidifying with every one of his forceful thrusts.

White-hot delirium took over and she lost herself in her impending orgasm as it welled up and began to overtake her. But he heaved himself out, all the way out, and before she knew it, he had turned her onto her back on the cot.

"Must see your face," he gritted. She stared at him, at the thick bands of crimson streaking across his cheekbones, at the tight set of his jaw, at his bared teeth. Their eyes locked and he thrust home.

Her body demanded she break off the eye contact, close her eyes and lose herself in the sensations of his claim. But she fought it. She needed to keep this connection with him. The force of it became more profound with every drive, building until their eyes seemed linked by some powerful energy neither of them could deny.

Again the whiteness loomed up—swirling clouds ready to drive her under. Devlin rammed into her harder and faster. Sweat trickled down his brow. His breath sawed in his chest. But the connection between them only grew stronger, thicker, more immutable with every thrust. Together they hurtled toward a precipice. It frightened Julia, for she could not imagine what lay on the other side. But it was unavoidable. Devlin groaned. His cock grew bigger, stretching her to her limit. She couldn't bear it. The edge was near.

She plummeted over, drowning in white heat, tumbling through it. Dimly, she heard her own sobs mingling with his low cries. And then she knew he had fallen over too, and he was pumping deep inside her, his cock and her cunt pulsing around each other in time, as if they were made for one another. And all the while, she stared into his eyes.

* * * * *

Much later, Julia felt stirring. She opened her eyes to darkness. She stretched languidly and saw that Devlin had risen and was stoking the fire. Eventually he got it started again and lit her lamp.

He turned from the fire to see her sitting up on the side of the bed. "Sorry to wake you."

He wore only his trousers, and firelight flicked off his torso in shades of gold. She pulled the quilt to cover herself, suddenly feeling shy. The corner of his mouth quirked in a cocky grin. "It is not necessary to hide anything from me, love. I've seen it all, you know."

"I know, I just—" She sighed. "I don't know."

Fear trickled in, cutting tiny incisions into her patched-up heart. What would happen now?

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

"Famished." His gaze raked her body and she felt a blush heating her cheeks. A blush! She couldn't account for it.

"I haven't much. Algernon usually brings his cook when he's here to work, and she leaves me my supper, but on Sundays I eat simply."

He opened her cupboard. "Bread and cheese! A bit of pie! Oh and look, there's some sherry! We will eat like kings."

She grinned, running her toes along the cold planks of the floor. "With you," she whispered, "anything is a feast."

He sobered instantly and turned from the cupboard to gaze at her.

"I have something for you." He grabbed his greatcoat and in two strides stood over her. He shook the coat out and held it before him, slowly lowering himself on one knee. "In fact, I have two things for you. Which will you choose first? Right pocket or left?"

What could it possibly be? She considered, drawing her lower lip between her teeth. "Right."

He reached deep into the pocket and drew something out, opening his hand to reveal a ring—a single pearl, the largest she had ever seen, surrounded by tiny diamonds.

"This is not a trinket," he said, almost apologetically. "It is not a gift to try to buy you, Julia. This—it was my mother's favorite possession."

"It is—" She could hardly speak. "It is so...*huge*."

He smiled faintly. "My father brought it home for her from Arabia. It was an engagement gift."

"Devlin—" It was too much, too symbolic. A family heirloom like this should belong to a wife, not a mistress.

His eyebrows knitted. "You do not like it?"

"Oh God," she bit out. She did not want to cry. "Of course I do. It is too much."

"It is not. Before she died, my mother told me to give it to the woman I would spend my life with."

Julia cupped his jaw, rough with a day's growth of beard. "I will cherish it forever. It is the most—" Her lower lip trembled. She had no words to finish.

He clasped his free hand over hers and drew it away from his cheek. He slipped the ring over her finger.

"I knew it would fit you perfectly," he murmured.

Her hand heavy with the weight of the pearl, she stared at it, but he patted the left pocket of his greatcoat. "Have you forgotten?"

She had, actually. She smiled up at him.

From the pocket, he extracted a folded piece of paper and handed it to her. Hands shaking, she unfolded it and read, blinking through her clouding vision. It was a special license to marry, with both their names on it, signed by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The world spun away. This could not be happening. She had absolutely convinced herself that Devlin would never want to marry her. She felt like chastising him for playing such a cruel joke.

She looked up at his face. The hard lines had softened into something determined yet uncertain. He ran his teeth over his bottom lip. His breaths were shallow, his dark eyes focused on her, vulnerable, questioning. "I was stupid, Julia," he said. "I didn't even think of it—marriage, I mean. When we were together, I thought only of the present. But now I am thinking of the future. I want you to be the one to bear my heir. I want you by my side, always, as my wife."

He wanted to marry her.

She simply sat still, stunned. He released a long breath and nodded at the paper. "It was damn near impossible wrangling that from him today. Cost me half my fortune."

She looked up at him. "Is this really what you want?"

His expression turned serious. "Yes."

"But what of my reputation? Everyone thinks I am a—"

He raised his hand to stop her from saying it. "Nobody will speak ill of you. I won't allow it."

She shook her head. How could he understand the pure malice of some of the members of the *ton*? He'd never had to endure it, after all.

Cupping her face in his hands, he said, "Listen to me. I don't care what they say." He stroked his thumbs over her cheekbones, emphasizing each word. "*I. Don't. Care.* As of tomorrow, you will be Lady Vaughn."

"Tomorrow?" So soon?

"If you will have me?"

She launched herself into his arms and he tumbled backward onto the floor, laughing. "Does that mean yes?"

She kissed his face, his nose, his eyes, his forehead. "Yes, Dev. Yes, yes, yes. Is this what you told Algernon? You had it planned all along, didn't you?"

He stroked her back. "I told him I had wronged you and I promised to do right by you. When I went to him this morning, I told him he needed to give me your key so I could fuck some sense into you."

She gasped and rose on her knees, straddling his legs. "You did not!" she exclaimed indignantly.

"Well, not in those words exactly." He grinned. "'Talk some sense into her' were the exact words I used, I believe. Then I showed him the marriage license."

She aimed a playful blow at him but he caught her wrist neatly and brought it to his mouth to press a kiss upon it. "Say again that you will have me."

"I will have you."

He struggled onto his elbows and narrowed his eyes at her. "There is one condition, my lady."

Julia's heart skipped a beat. "What is it?"

"This 'sovereign of my own body' business. I can't have it, Julia."

"Dev—"

"I am serious." He smoothed his hands over the curve of her waist and his eyes glinted possessively. "I will rule your body, now and forever. But I offer you something in return."

"What is that?"

He rose to a sitting position and wrapped his arms around her. His cock, already hardening, pressed against her, and she felt an answering warmth between her legs.

"You will be sovereign over me. My body, my heart, my soul. Now and forever."

Something bloomed inside of her, bringing with it a peace she had never before known. She stroked him, trailing her fingers down his nose, jaw line and neck, skimming his chest and nipple. All of this beautiful, mouthwatering male belonged to her. She followed the trail of her fingers with her mouth, tasting his salty, sandalwood flavor.

"I agree to your condition, Dev," she murmured, then looked up into his smiling face. "Now and forever."

About the Author

Raised on a boat in the South Pacific and in the quiet rainforests of Hawaii, Dawn Halliday had plenty of time to develop her overzealous imagination. Between exploring deserted atolls, swimming in churning seas, and exploring lava tubes, Dawn started dreaming up stories of love and adventure before she could read them.

When she's not traveling to exotic lands (which she can always justify as "research"), Dawn lives with her True Love and three rambunctious children in Southern California. She writes passionate historical and contemporary romance, and loves every minute of it.

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

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