



# *Undeniable*

*Gayle Eden*



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## Chapter 1

Damien Chevalier, Viscount Edrych heard the loud pounding on the front door. He eased his swarthy musculature up, off the white sheets, and was raking his hands through his unruly hair as he called out, "Bloody hell. Come in."

The cottage door opened with a slam. An out of breath servant leaned against the door facing, wheezing, "She is here. Your bride is at the Hall."

"Very well. Thank you, Tom. And, walk back up the hill. No use giving yourself a bloody heart attack."

Tom eyed the rumpled black mane framing a face that was both aristocratic and foreign. The bloody Lord was stark necked, his hair could use a trim; it lay clear to his shoulders. He reeked of too much whiskey and rum. Given that the man had been a bastard, a black sheep, until just last week, when the Viscount stuck his spoon in the wall and the will made him at last the legitimate heir. He supposed the master had done well to take his whore here in an empty cottage, instead of the master chamber the night before his wedding.

"Filbert has your bath heating, your clothing laid out. The Duke and Duchess Burkhams arrived with the Vicar, more than an hour ago. Mrs. Handily can see the woman settled, but you'd best get yourself up there, and cleaned of a certain stink-- before that Lady Katherine sees you. Like as not, she'll change her mind and hie it back to Nottingham."

The Viscount stood, stretching all six feet and three inches, until his fingers touched the beams overhead causing Tom to cast his eyes to the floor as not to gawk at that honed flesh.

A loud yawn came, before the slide of clothing and thud of boots the man pulled on.

*It was a bloody shame*, the servant thought, that the old Viscount had waited so long to do right by him. All the servants knew him, and his mother. The Viscount had him schooled well, sent him to Greece, where his grandfather on his mother's side lived, and where it was said the master had worked in a common fishing village whilst making his own income casting his nets in the sea, and painting or drawing.

His mother, the opera singer, who had been the old Viscount's mistress for years, had lived mostly in Spain the last eight. Damien had a close relationship with her until her death. Nevertheless those times he was in England, in London especially, he had caused enough scandal and gossip to keep the old man from having any peace.

Never mind that the Viscount had no legal heirs besides. He had punished the young master, obviously. Kept him in the shadows and on the fringes even though it was common knowledge who he was. His blood was Edrych's and everyone, right down to the Vicar recording the birth, had written the father's name clearly enough. The cruelest part was, that the Viscount had apparently wed his mistress at the time of the pregnancy and the birth, but sworn all to silence. He later dissolved the marriage for still unknown reasons, leaving only that abrupt note with the solicitor, which proved Damien's legitimacy as heir. Tom knew that it was far too late, however, for the

lord had lived too long with the stigma of bastardry for any piece of paper to have made a difference.

Tom stepped back at the sound of boots thudding, glancing at Damien as he came out pulling the ties of his billowing white shirt closed. They climbed the rise toward the mansion.

"The lady, don't look like no bluestocking."

"What's that?"

Tom said louder, "The lady. You was muttering she was a bluestocking while in your cups. I've met a few, pinched-faced, dowdy ones. This one, though has the footmen tripping over themselves."

"Appealing, is she?"

"Handsome I'd say. And shaped..." Tom made some waves with his hands.

Damien laughed and clapped him on the back. "Well. I suppose that will make getting the marriage consummation much easier. Although, I doubt we share the same tastes, Tom. Begging your pardon."

Since it was well known Tom's wife was big as a draft horse, Tom grunted, "You fancy gents like them pale and sick looking', too thin. But she's not overweight by any means, Sir. She's like them paintings...the good ones."

"All right, old man. I get the idea." They topped the rise, headed toward the back path, which led to the rear entry. "Let's get me shaved and trussed up for the sacrificial alter. I need more sleep."

As Tom opened the back door, servants rushed to follow the Viscount up to fill the bath. Tom shook his head and sighed. The old Viscount was dead and everything had fallen into the master's lap at last; wealth, farms, stables kennels, hunting lodges-- even acceptance of the *Ton*, chiefly thanks to this marriage. He dearly hoped the man didn't muck this up and keep up his wild ways. There was nothing at all to rebel against now, and certainly, any man with sense would count themselves fortunate to get Lady Katherine, bluestocking or not, she came with a fortune and connections, and she was handsome besides.

\* \* \* \*

Lady Katherine Channing, called Katie, heard the thumps and deep voices in the adjoining room. She'd been put in what would be her mistress chambers, in order to refresh for the wedding. It was separated from the master area by a sitting room, and beside that, a bathing chamber. She did not doubt which one the deep-voiced man was in, for he fell against the wall declared that someone named Jones, *was trying to scald his bloody arse off*.

Katie finished doing up the ivory satin gown she'd had designed with latches down the front in the shape of roses. Other than that adornment, it was plain with long sleeves; the skirt falling straight, to mask what she considered was her generous backside.

Finished with that, she repaired the damage to her bronze hair. The straight mass had been half drawn up, with long strands dangling down her back and over her shoulder. Tucking a scrap of lace in the low square bodice, she looked around and spied her shoes, satin pumps, she'd tossed out of the trunk.



She should have let the maid help her. Kate preferred not to have her person fussed over. That late debut, when she was nineteen, had cured her of any curiosity about her feminine side. She would rather read a book, feed sheep, or visit a museum. It was not only ridiculous but also exhausting to primp and try to look perfect. Besides, at twenty-five, she had lived in her father's house at Channing Park alone for two years. Though the Duke and Duchess were her neighbors-- and she had servants, she wasn't some preening deb or even a romantic woman at heart. She was practical and intelligent, well educated-- and could bloody well do without frills.

Standing before the long mirror she absently looked herself over while she detected those thumps and a pouring of water. At five-foot-five inches she was considered average height, and despite being unfashionable, rounded, and curvy, she at least didn't look like the *desperate dowd* she knew society had dubbed her.

It was their revenge, she supposed, for her being so outspoken and not conforming during her come out. Only the Duchess comprehended that she hadn't been husband hunting at all, doing the debut only because her father, though a brilliant lawyer, had also been an Earl. It was one's duty. She'd done it, with every fiber in her being resisting such a superficial role, because no man took her seriously or respected her mind. *They didn't want her to have any bloody mind at all.*

She had no reason to think that Damien Chevalier would either, but he needed her for his own reasons too. She had to make the man respectable and accepted that by wedding him to her bloodlines, giving him an heir, and

as the solicitor for the Viscount had said, *teaching him how to be discreet and taming some of that wildness she might do that*. No short order, but she had little doubt she could accomplish it.

She couldn't get past the barriers of her sex if *she* didn't wed. To be widowed, even if she had been older, mayhap... But the fact was she wanted to build schools and hospitals, to put her mind to use, her money to something productive. Too often, she was reminded that charity and genteel philanthropy was one thing, actually running some institution or even overseeing the building of one, was out of the question. She had problems with her own steward-- because he would not listen to her suggestions.

The advanced farming methods, the experiments she wanted to attempt, were all humored but never seriously implemented. She was bloody tired of waiting for the world to realize women were as smart as men. It would never happen. The best she could hope for was that as the wife of someone like Damien was reported to be, nothing she did would be blinked at. She could study what she liked, do as she pleased, and they would work out the kinks as they went along. It was a perfect solution.

The thumping ceased, voices faded further back. Katie headed below to the parlor, where the Vicar waited with the Duke and Duchess. She knew very well *whom* she was wedding. Anyone over puberty had heard of Damien and his untamed ways. Believing that honesty and bluntness were assets, she fully intended to assure him that he could carry on with his pursuits eventually, with her blessing.

Albeit he must be discreet, and refrain from flaunting his mistresses and bedmates. Men were going to have their vices regardless, and astute wives turned a blind eye. She had neither illusions nor expectations, and he had his own fortune to squander now. So long as she got her ideal of freedom, they would get on famously.

\* \* \* \*

"Not the neck cloth," Damien muttered, trying to avoid the fussing valet who stood a foot shorter.

"But Sir. It is proper for a wedding. You must wear it. Just for the nuptials."

"Very well." Damien could not suffer through more Jean-Paul's whining and wheedling. He'd experienced it enough when his father had commanded an appointment and he'd stayed in the seldom-used apartments assigned him. Then, his father would observe all formalities, though those wasted visits invariably ended with Damien telling him to go to everlasting hell.

He was the Viscount now. He could wear what he bloody well liked.

Jean was finished with his task. Damien did draw the line at tying his hair back with the black ribbon. He strode to the vanity and brushed it. It was drying in its usual long waves. He caught the merest sight of the formal black and white clothing he wore; the lace spilling over his hands, and the blue embroidery in the black brocade vest. The signet ring twinkled on his finger. He grunted at it.

Downing a brandy, that had been poured earlier, he mentally mused that every visit to the hall had been one

long lecture, and list of conditions he must conform to, before his father would claim him openly. He must follow in the footsteps of his hypocritical sire and believe his own sham. He did his level best to act the opposite, and the old sod still made him legit.

The valet was cleaning up the room. Tom came in, having bathed, shaved, and changed into fresh blue livery. Stationed by the door, he cast his brown eyes over Damien and smiled. "You look right spiffy, sir. A proper Viscount, save for that hair. Ought to tie it back." He fingered his own sack-like que.

"And you ought to act like a servant. But you won't." Domain smiled sourly.

"Wouldn't know how with you, my lord. Since I've been pulling you out of the fires of destruction so long. But I'll be right and proper with the Lady. "

Casting him a jaundice eye, Damien grunted. "You'd better, or else I'll tell Maude that you been playing a bit of slap and tickle with the under maid."

Tom choked and turned a beet red, pulling at his lace cravat.

The Viscount laughed, but very soon lost his smile and looked at the clock. "Lead me to the gallows, old man." He bowed to Tom.

"You'll know the way. They're in the blue parlor. "Tom found his voice. "I'm to follow behind, make sure you don't turn and run."

"Never." Damien stepped out into the hall, squared his broad shoulders and flicked some lint off his sleeve. "I'm

thinking of what I'll get out of it. A free bedding and a n-  
-"

Tom coughed. "I believe the Vicar is at the bottom of the stairs."

Damien leaned over to look, indeed spotting the plump face of that man. "Good day to you, Hansen," he called down loudly.

"And to you, Sir," The Vicar called back.

As they walked down the stairs, Damien whispered back to Tom, "Caught him in a tavern once with his frock up and his trousers down. I was about thirteen. The Vicar and I understand each other."

Tom rolled his eyes, nodding to the butler who opened the parlor doors, sliding them back on either side.

They reached the landing and walked to the doorway.

Upon seeing the bride and the Duke, the Duchess beside them, at the far end by the mantle, Damien commented drly, "Isn't it the groom who is supposed to await the bride's entry?"

Tom opened his mouth, but before he could speak, a rather husky but clear female voice replied, "Since neither of us are traditionalist, I assumed it would not matter."

"Indeed." Damien was staring at the woman in ivory silk, looking her over from head to toe, slowly, before he murmured. "If you are Lady Katherine, I will willingly cross the room and give myself to you... for whatever you wish."

The Duchess gasped. The old Duke coughed in his fist. But again the bride answered rather dryly. "Marriage will do, for a start."

*Interesting....* Damien walked toward her, his mind trying to put together those mocking rumors of her bluestocking ways with all the warm colors and curves filling his vision. As he paused a foot away to look her over again, he murmured, "Let's get on with it then. " He turned and hauled the Vicar forward with a hand cupped on the man's shoulder. "Say the words, man, and be quick about it."

With eyes rolling from the servants, a shake of his bride-to-be's head. The wedding nuptials began.

\* \* \* \*

Katie knew the words by heart and went through the ritual with little attention. Namely because she was completely thrown by her husband's actual appearance. She stood there by him, coming somewhere up to his shoulder, and breathed in a mixture of man heat and dark winds. Sneaking peeks at him from the corner of her eye, it was not enough that he was tall and obviously more than fit, but that his shoulders were broad, his skin a coffee and cream brown-- his face would stop a blind woman in her tracks.

From the moment she'd glimpsed that visage framed by long inky hair, the stuff waved down to his shoulders, she hadn't breathed properly. He had a broad forehead, winged brows and thick raven lashes. Those eyes had shone a burnished sapphire, so true a color that she'd blinked.

His nose was aristocratic, an arrogant blade with flared nostrils, There was a sensual fullness to his mouth, the lips a deep peach velvet, and a set of dimples that grooved each lean cheek. God just *had* to bless him with a voice in a deep tone, that she'd felt to the arches of her feet.

*It really was not fair.* They'd called him handsome, even exotic, but not one bloody person had whispered the truth. He was everything dark and forbidden; a wickedly handsome man... who was built like a statue... eyes rivaling the midnight sky.

*Good God.* Kate shook herself mentally; *she was composing bloody poetry already.* Disgusted with herself, she replayed his rude and intimate words before ceremony. *The man was a rake, a bastard.* Not that she cared, unless he had the pox. *And-- he had better not--* In fact, she planned to ask him that, before the marriage bed.

Kate was distracted whilst he took her hand and placed a gold band on her fourth finger. Then she, with her ideal of equality, put her father's band on his ring finger. Fully prepared for a kiss to seal the vows, she certainly was not --when the *You may kiss the bride came*, and her husband slid his warm male hands under her jaws, tilted her head up, brought his handsome face down, and put those soft lips over hers, kissing her whilst moving his head round. And *Oh God...* trying to put his sleek tongue in her mouth.

Kate jerked back, bringing his hands down at the same time, just that moment hearing the coughs and murmurs. Her gaze was pinned by a sapphire blue, and she knew from those deepening dimples he was laughing at her. Her lips tingled, her breath was trying to stop

somewhere in her lungs, and her belly was doing acrobatics.

"Dinner is served in the formal dining room," Thomas announced loudly.

Kate felt the Duchess take her arm and turn her away from Damien, before leading her into the dining room.

On the way, the woman hissed, "Are you sure about this? We could have the thing annulled at any time before the... consummation."

Kate was not sure. In fact, she was tempted to run from something for the first time in memory. She had too much pride to actually do it. She'd always claimed that women were as brave as men. Why, her first published piece was about women warriors. How would it look if she could not manage one husband?

She patted the Duchess's hand. "I shall be fine, your grace. Come and visit in a month or so. You will see a different man. "

"One prays so, dear." The Duchess released her arm, allowing her to take her place at Damien's right.

Kate watched the servants before looking at Damien, aware that the Duchess and Duke were sitting stiff and silent. She leaned over as he was about to sip from the wineglass, and whispered, "You should enquire about the Duke and Duchess's trip. And thank them for witnessing the wedding."

He lowered the glass. His blue eyes pinning her again and his brow rising.



She raised her own. "Manners... politeness. You do know what they are?"

He narrowed those eyes slightly, before turning to regard the stately couple, and then completely surprise Kate by having a polite exchange, including thanking them and engaging the Duke in conversation about London.

Nibbling her meal, sipping the wine, Kate did her own eye narrowing as she watched the rakehell turn the epitome of a gentleman, and yes, act the Viscount to the hilt. She managed to take part in conversation too, though the man was distracting her. He chewed meat and his strong white teeth distracted her. He sipped wine, and from noting his sinewy fingers on the stem, long artistic, to the lips that caressed the edge of the wineglass, she was diverted in the most unusual and annoying ways. .

By coffee and dessert, Kate was giving herself another lecture. As the newly wedded couple walked their guests to their coach Kate had herself completely in hand, though. Waving to them, she afterwards glanced back to see the housekeeper signal one of the maids. The girl introduced herself, as did a half dozen footmen. She peeked at Damien who was undoing his neck cloth and watching the dark clouds gather in the sky. After introductions were complete, Kate felt a drop of rain smack her on the head, and stepped through whilst the butler held the door.

She said, to no one in particular, "I must change my dress." But as she went up the stairs, her husband matched her stride with three easy steps. Kate ignored him. She read nothing into the evidence that he was removing his coat, that cravat, and was undoing his

vest. She held her breath though, until she was through the door and leaning against it. Hearing him continue to the sitting room and then beyond.

With all the intent of a knight arming for battle, she stripped out of the ivory silk, and wore only a thigh length chemise and stockings, was digging in the trunk for her thick wool gown, when the door between the chambers opened.

Straightening, she eyed Domain distrustfully where he filled the doorway-- Trying to ignore that he had pulled out that shirt and that it lay open to the waist. He wore the snug black trousers and boots. That chest was as brown as polished oak. Her perfect sight could make out mounds and ridges of muscle.

"Knock the next time."

He leaned against the jamb, having no such compunction and openly eyeing her profile in the ivory chemise, the length of leg she revealed encased in sheer stockings. From her bent position before, her hair had loosed from the combs. She felt one slide down through the mass and dangle at her shoulder, before she yanked it free and tossed it into the trunk.

"It's our wedding night."

"It's hardly night," she corrected, and leaned down to grab the first garment her hand touched, her robe, a silk one, in her favorite hue of chocolate. She pulled it on and belted it, then turned to face him. "It's scarcely evening, in fact."

"I'm sure marriages have been consummated in day light before," he murmured.

“Do you have the pox?”

Kate relished his blink and subtle shake of head, followed by an indignant, “I beg your pardon?”

She shrugged. “It’s a simple question. I do not believe there is a cure, and I certainly will not lay with a man who is so infected.”

“You should have thought of that before the wedding.”

She blanched. “You have it then?”

“I bloody well don’t!” He boomed and glared at her.

“Very well. There’s no need to get huffy about it. Half the Lords in the ton are daft as ducks from...”

“I don’t have it!” he growled.

She would not laugh, but was sorely tempted. “Are you sure?” She provoked.

“I’m sure.” He glared harder. “And what... would virgins know of such things.”

“Very little. But I am well read and have studied medicine as well as law.”

“Good God.” He stared.

She smiled stiffly. “Yes.” Tis all true. I have a brain. I’m sure you heard that before *you also* agreed to the marriage.”

"I heard it." His eyes went down her, then up. "A woman who looks like you, doesn't need one."

She was insulted. "A man such as yourself could use half a one."

The Viscount met her gaze. "You've a mouth on you, and spirit to boot. But you don't kiss worth a bloody damn."

Kate's back stiffened but she knew he was provoking her. "You're more than handsome, quite... overwhelming... in physical assets. One supposes that females, you associate with, don't mind a' tall that you are a bore. I do. I am your wife, a vicountess, and I demand more respect."

He laughed mockingly, and reminded, "You brought up the subject."

"So I did. And I shall be as blunt and frank about anything else that concerns me. But that does not mean that I will tolerate crudeness or disrespect. You are... thirty-five I believe. And a grown man. We have entered into a partnership, a union, to serve both our wishes. Once I carry the heir, you may go back to your amusements, so long as you are discreet, but as there is a chance you may still infect yourself, you will not share my bed afterwards."

"Let me be just as blunt, m'dear," he retorted soft as steel. "Whatever I decide to do, whom it is with, or however I speak, is none of your bloody affair. I do not need your permission. In this land, it is the woman who comes under the husband's rood."

"Archaic." She shrugged. "As it happens, I know the laws of the land. I am speaking of our relationship, our union,

and our future-- if you wish to live to see your heir and if you have any consideration for the shadow you will leave for him to grow up beneath. I couldn't care less that you were a bastard. They are common, and I employ a few at Channing Park. But acting the role is no longer necessary. You have a title, responsibilities, and you will have a wife, so long as you meet me half way."

"Half way?" He sneered.

"Yes. I am not restricting your freedom. Not once the marriage is consummated. I merely insist on discretion and some respect when you speak to me."

"You are damned provoking." He came close to shouting but didn't.

"No doubt I am. And that tone, even accusing me, is preferable to that roar you let loose. I've nothing against honesty. I think it will serve to keep us both from any illusions. And despite my dig, I know that you were educated in the best academies and trained in all the social niceties. We can both get what we want from this marriage if some effort is put forth."

His brow had been rising again, He inquired nastily, "And just what is it you want from this marriage?"

Kate opened her mouth and turned, slammed the lid down and sat heavily on the trunk. "You didn't get my letter?"

"What letter?"

"The one where I accepted..."

"Ah. I did. But I didn't read past the *I accept* part."

She glared at him now. "That's bloody unfair. I was under the impression we were both clear on why I wed you."

He pulled away from the jamb and walked to the bed. Grabbing one of the deep purple pillows he stacked it on the other, climbed on, and got himself comfortable. Ankles crossed, hands behind his head, "I'm listening."

She ground her teeth. "It was nigh on five pages."

"So it will be a bloody long conversation. Requiring amazing patience. Get on with it."

She was tempted to storm out. But there was a storm already out there slashing icy rain against the windows.

Folding her arms she began to explain, to list the things she wanted to sponsor and build. She spoke of schools for children, girls mostly, and infirmaries for the poor. She got off subject at times, explaining as if to a child, about irrigation and bridges. Quite easily Kate forgot whom she was talking to, and spoke in depth on every subject, revealing the research she had done, the vast number of articles she had read, and throwing out names of people she had been corresponding with for years. Her interest in medicines was equal to her fascination with engineering and botany. Then there were the animals, land, crops, the fascinating world of plants and their uses from medicinal to providing food, preserving the soil...such intriguing advances in all the sciences...

\* \* \* \*

Damien was listening, although his eyes wandered down that v of her robe where she had folded her arms and made the material gape. Her skin was smooth, a nice light cream hue. He flickered it down to her legs, since the material gaped there too, showing shapely knees and smooth calves, small ankles. Despite what she covered, he found it stirringly provocative. Her hair was completely down and with another comb dangling, it showed itself to be thick and straight as a ribbon. That unique bronze color was rich and glinting with lights from the fireplace. Her eyes, *he called them light brown mentally*, but they were a golden tint, large and expressive. He was not displeased with his wife's looks.

Some part of his brain was impressed by her intellect too. Awed, that she had not simply been sprouting drivel but that she actually had researched and read and planned in her own mind for many years. This was no woman who read poems and novels and simply philosophy. *She sounded like a bloody man.*

Another part saw a spark in those depths when she was into her subject, and he pretended that it was all together another emotion, since he didn't particularly like her, particularly when she was using that lecturing tone. Whilst he listened and played that game of enjoying the view, he had to admit that Tom was right. She was built in an hourglass shape, and well proportioned. And she was handsome rather than simply pretty-- and he admitted that husky tone in her voice, maturity he supposed, was damn near sensual.

In the distance he could hear the rain, the cold wind, pelting drops that landed on the windows. Damien closed his eyes a moment, indulging in a fantasy of removing that robe... and was asleep before he realized it.

-- We used cow dung that spring and..." Kate's voice trailed off on hearing a long steady rumble. Focusing now, on her husband's face, she realized that he was asleep, in fact, deeply slumbering.

Lips pressed tight, she shot to her feet to remind him how rude this behaviour was, to call him a bore again. Her mouth closed before the words formed, and standing at the corner post, she merely gazed down him.

Feeling a swirl in her tummy, a speed of heart, muttering a few mental curses of disgust that she was attracted to anything so superficial as looks. Really attracted. Kate thought that it made no earthly sense, because the man was discourteous and uncouth, and not the least bit what she had hoped.

Nonetheless, she prided herself on honesty, even when it smarted. She felt something that could only be a physical attraction every time she looked at him. That open shirt had a gap big enough now, to show the division in his upper chest, the mounds of muscle, and below it ridges, sinew, a taunt stomach with a swirl of hair around his navel. Those too-snug trousers outlining long legs honed with muscle too. His face. *Christ...* she had never seen any man who had that mixture of a wild gypsy and a blue-blooded lord. It was downright disturbing, how sensual and handsome it looked. His hair was like undulating black ribbons against that silly feminine pillow; inky, glossy, appearing soft enough to make her palms itch to touch.

Kate sighed long and rubbed her temple against the post. Things were not as she pictured them. *He was not.* She had the feeling that all her dreams were just that.



She wasn't supposed to feel anything for a man like Damien. She was supposed-- to keep things in perspective-- and get on with her own life.

She did not believe in love, not the romantic kind, nor in romance at all. Poets were a too sensitive breed, who infused their illusions into reality and muddled it all up. Physical attraction she could comprehend. She could even deal with it. The natural inclination to pair up, to mate, to find pleasing things pleasing.

But she never had been attracted. She never had... *until now*.

\* \* \* \*

Damien lifted his lashes, his vision clearing whilst he watched flickering shadows on the ceiling. The room had cooled and he sat up with only a whisper of his trousers against the coverlet, swinging his long legs to the side and scrapping his hair back. Standing, he yawned and turned toward the dying fire, going stock still when his eyes landed on the woman curled in the shadows of the window seat, a too thin throw over her legs.

He saw her hand resting on an open book, her chin tucked down, and her hair spilling over the edge of the thin padded seat, touching the hard polished floor. Moving to take off his boots, he set them by the bed and then padded to the fire. Building it high from the logs in the niche, he sat on his haunches there, with the heat warming him, still staring at Katherine.

When his proximity to the flames became uncomfortable he arose and went to the bed, pulling down the thick covers before going to his bride, reaching down to scoop her up. The book thudded to the floor. He'd just turned

and taken a step with her completely lax body cradled against his chest, when her lashes lifted.

He watched her look at him, feeling something between amusement and resentment when she sighed rather resigned and closed her eyes again. Damien got her to the bed, settled in. He took off that robe that was twisted and half out, flinging it to the foot of the bed, before pulling up the covers.

Turning to the window, where the rain still battered the muted glass. He picked up the book and looked at the title, grunting as he read *A Vindication of The Rights of Woman*. He carried it over to the trunk and meant to drop it in, but saw that she had opened another.

Squatting, he laid the book inside and ran his fingers over spines of a dozen others. There were papers and pamphlets, complex drawings stacked in a neat pile. He lifted a few volumes leafing through them and recognizing things he had studied himself years ago. Aiming to slip it into a slot, he saw a paper on the bottom and picked it up, holding it toward the firelight and recognizing that flowing script as her handwriting.

*Love is often confused as the normal bonds that are instinctive in human nature. Those who raise love between man and woman to some higher plane, are themselves caught in the grip of weakness that could be alleviated by broadening their minds. Those poets and novelist, whose prose supposedly brings tears to the, are merely painting wildflowers on canvas, captured in bloom although they too die out every season as nature dictates.*

Good God. Damien swore mentally, before skimming to the last faint lines.

*I believe in the urge to mate, the natural attraction, to those things that may bring us fleeting joy. I have bonded with those who have nurtured me. But one cannot fall into love, like some picturesque pond one is drawn to, whose depths swallow one whole. Humans were not created to thrive on emotions, but on intellect, reasoning, and acceptance of truths.*

He placed the paper and books back, then closed the trunk. Standing a moment, at the edge of the bed, shaking his head that so contradictory a woman existed. His vast experience with women, including his mother, showed that they were forever in love with someone or something. Men were the cynics and jades; women were the romantics, the creatures who wanted fidelity, commitment, softness, and understanding and love; the more idealistic the better.

It occurred to Damien that his bride did not propose to fall in love with him. She did not believe in it. It wrapped around his brain that a Lady of high birth had entered into a marriage with him, having an agenda of her own. He reminded himself of that kiss, her inexperience, her virginity-- which, he never doubted, in spite of her progressive education and ideas. He imaged a woman with her views had her virtue locked so deeply, that the reverse thought was laughable.

His brow rose slowly. His wife had never been kissed or touched. She had never made love in the general sense. It put all sorts of ideas in his head, as naturally, his male pride and innate arrogance rose to the fore. She was a provoking little female. He had intended to wed her, consummate, get on with his life, as she put it, with little adjustment other than the necessary for the title. However, he had been called contrary himself, and never

declined a challenge. *Wouldn't it be amusing to have an agenda of his own?*

## Chapter 2

Kate rolled to her side, sliding her hands under the cool side of the pillow. She rubbed the tip of her nose as it tickled, and fought whatever it was that prodded her to wake. She was not ready to wake up.

However sleep was fading. She opened her eyes disagreeably, resenting that internal clock that sometimes yanked her from sleep at dawn.

It was no internal clock, but rather a pair of staring sapphire eyes.

Licking her lips she husked, "Dare I hope that you are asleep with your eyes open?"

Those dimples deepened. "No. I've been up for hours. Bathed, shaved, had my coffee. "

"And you climbed in bed, to watch me snore?"

"You don't snore." He rose to prop an elbow on his elbow.

Kate tried not to, but her gaze went down where the cover slacked. She knew from the bare throat, the shoulders, the chest; he was nude. "You're unclothed."

"Um. "He was looking over her sleepy face. "I generally sleep in the buff."

She was not going to blush. "One supposes that comes from having your trousers off so often, that you feel unnatural with clothing on."

His deep laugh was quiet. "I see you wake up in top form."

She sighed and slid up in the bed, careful to bring the covers with her. Pushing her hair out of her face, she spied a tray on the trunks. "Any of that left?"

"Yes. Shall I get you a cup."

She laid her hand on the covers to tamp them down when it looked as if he would. "No!" She said too fast and loud, then ignored his chuckles while she slid out and snatched up the robe. Kate put it on, and discreetly discarded the stockings before pouring her coffee. Looking at the window, she could not tell the time, but the clock showed it was indeed dawn.

She padded to the bed and sat on the edge with her back to him. The sips were waking her brain and body, and when she felt the bed dip, she glanced over her shoulder to find he'd sat up.

"You'll see it all eventually."

She turned back around.

"I'll insist you sleep n..."

"All right." She cut him off and turned after sitting the cup down. Her knee up and facing him she added, "We'll both be necked when the marriage is consummated. You'll sleep nude; I'll sleep nude, until the heir is made. There. You see how just being frank and stating your preference sounds? We are both mature and intelligent so you make your preferences known and I will either assent or decline... with an explanation. It is only the

tone and the intent that makes the words more than they are.”

He was looking at the ivory satin chemise stretched across her breasts, apparently not listening. Kate looked down too, and saw that her nipples were standing out and that the robe had gaped. She jerked her eyes up, to find his there to meet her gaze.

He murmured, “I can’t wait to see them. To wrap my fingers around them and run my tongue around those nipples.”

She blushed. She could feel the burn on her face. “You are being crude.”

“Your ignorance is glaring.”

Kate’s lips parted. “Why are you intent on embarrassing me?”

“I’m stating a fact.” He cocked his brow. “Whatever you may have read, you’ve no understanding or knowledge of mating. People are not cows and horses, dear Kate. In spite of your noble aim to bring respectability and acceptance to me through this union, your preconceived plan to tame the bastard Viscount. In this bed, in any bed, I am the dominant one.”

She snorted in spite of that truth. “How arrogant and...barbaric.”

He simply smiled. “How true. But as much as you’ve acquired yourself a so-called man’s mind. You cannot dictate to his urges or his body when it comes to sex. Whist you are chanting your little mantra about words

and their lack of emotion, I could be making you eat them by eating you."

Kate turned a deeper red. Whilst she was dying to ask, she would cut out her tongue first.

But he husked, "You've seen erotic art, one presumes."

*Oh Good Lord.* She had a complete mental flash of exactly what he meant.

"Look," Kate said tightly after a moment. "We entered this marriage for our reasons. You were purposefully looking for a bride of certain bloodlines too. There are... certain things required. The heir being one. Since I understand that men can and do have sexual relations with little emotion, and since, we weren't a love match, something I don't believe in, then we can have a bond perhaps? If we respect each other and grow to have some...affection there is no need to do more than a wife and husband of rank, joined in an arranged marriage, would do, in the bedroom."

"In my life, the title may dictate certain adjustments But rest assured, Kate. I don't care a bloody damn about titles and society when I want a woman. And you want care either eventually."

She stared at him. "You are doing and saying all of this for some...obstinate reason."

"Let's clear one thing up. I did not ask my father to claim his heir. Nor did I covet the bloody title and his wealth. I did everything possible to keep that bastard from redeeming himself by committing so noble a public act. I have lived as a bastard for thirty-five years, and did not give a bleeding damn what your society thought



of it or me. The sonofabitch dangled that bait before me year after year, and I told him where to put it. I am not thrilled, as society thinks, to have his bloody name and title and lands, and their cleaned slate is not welcomed. They can go to hell for all I care.

But the sod did his last hurrah in spite of my efforts, and I got it along with those conditions, of bride and heir and following the rules. Those are facts, Kate. And if you want your high ideals and dreams manifested, you had best learn that aside from those things I can't control, I won't be manipulated or dictated to or lectured to, by some bookish virgin who uses intellect to mask her fear of sex and men, and is likely experiencing something she cannot control."

Kate had been staring at the coverlet, and she continued to whilst the last sound faded from his lips. She did not know that about his feelings toward the title. She had assumed like all of society that he gained his well-earned rep as some sort of revenge, because he did want the title. His dig hurt. She refused to give his opinion of her attitude toward sex any credit. But it smarted all the same. What was foremost in her mind, however, was that memory of him talking to the Duke with knowledge and ease, as well as his lapses between acting the rogue, then yelling, then speaking as he just had.

In the abstract it had seemed like a good idea to wed him. She had read enough about his sort in the gossip rags, and there were gentry around who gambled and wenched and left their wives to live almost separate lives. In the abstract, it seemed the ideal sort of arrangement. She meant to be one of those wives who would be happy with that sort.

But there was nothing abstract about sitting here with him, and nothing familiar about the complexity of his character. He was not just Damien Chevalier the rakehell bastard, but a very real man that she had to deal with. Kate chewed her lip and admitted how very ignorant she was, and not just about sex. Looking in from the outside, arranged marriages were sensible, most seemed to work for both parties. Being in one herself was a bit different. The intimacy and understanding each other on a closer level had not occurred to her. She assumed that men did not indulge in that anyway. Nothing felt like it should, or rather, as she assumed it should.

She reached over and got the cup, finishing the tepid coffee before sitting the cup down. Slowly turning to look at him, she found him with his hands stacked behind his head, looking across the room at nothing.

Her gaze went to those hollows and mounds making up his arms, and the inky hair under them. Then to his chest since the covers fell low to his hips. There was the merest glimpse of indented hip, but everything on him was dark and sleek and taut. Her eyes lingered a moment on his nipples, peaked too and a deepest peach. Up again, to his face and those strong bones, the grooves on his cheeks. She recalled studying anatomy and visiting museums, lingering at the male statues. No cold white marble compared to a living breathing man. Nothing could, to that uniquely exotic face. He was vivid, too warm and masculine--

Being attracted would certainly help with the mating part. But if that kiss had affected her, as brief as it had been, what would happen when the actual breeding began? Kate's heart hushed for a moment. She could not believe that a man like him was perceptive enough

to guess the truth and she was just now realizing. It wasn't possible. Still, she could not deny to herself that looking at him, suddenly, she felt a complete panic at what she might do or say during the sexual act.

*She could not kiss worth a damn.*

Kate let that go through her mind too, couldn't stop it. Smarting in her pride because she liked the idea of equality of the sexes, and didn't like the idea that she would be inferior in any way. If he would simply (take her) as many women claimed their husband's did, in the dark, gown up and quickly, none of this would be relevant. But she knew, whether his arrogance, pride or simply his habit, he was not going to be that cooperative and predictable. He was going to make her participate rather more than she had prepared herself to.

Hearing the rain stop, seeing the shadow as a wind gusted down the chimney, she noted just a lightening of the room, which announced the fullness of morning.

Kate cleared her throat. "I am willing to learn how to kiss."

His head turned slowly, those sapphire eyes moving over her face and vivid from the lifting of shadows in the chamber. He lowered his arms and sat forward to reach her hand. Tugging a bit, he soon had her lying on the bed flat with her mussed hair around her face and shoulders.

Kate's gaze moved to his mouth as he came closer and that spiral started in her belly long before it actually touched her lips. A whisper, barely touching at all, he was moving his head slow, brushing only enough so that Kate felt as if butterfly wings were fluttering over. Her

lips parted instinctively, and he parted his to match it, then that warm male breath was fanning her mouth. Saliva gathered under her tongue as if hungered for some delicious fruit.

Damien lifted his head having braced himself by his palms on either side of hers. Still close, but far enough so that they could meet gazes, he wet his lips and whispered, "Wet your own."

Kate did, feeling a relief simply from having dried them with short pants that came from his attentions. It was everything now, that look, that heat from his larger body being so close. She seriously worried at that riot going through her.

"Again."

When she did it once more, his head lowered quickly. The contact of his tongue against hers made her jump. Her hands flew to his hard sides. But there was no time to register one feeling before he slid his tongue in, laved sensually around in there, before pulling back to whisper again, "taste me, Kate."

She knew somehow what he meant, and her tongue went into his mouth, causing her to groan with the flavor and heat there. There was something explicit and forbidden in it, some dark taste of passion and intimacy. The urge to lave, delve, to move her own head in counter to his, was there.

She forgot about learning and lessons. Her hands slid up his sides, around his sinewy back, her short nails were digging into his flesh. Sultry and labored breathing echoed between them. The erotic ambiance took over and bodies became aroused.

Damien began to alter and catch her lower lip between his strong teeth, to lave under it and kiss soft at the corner of her mouth. He made a deep sound as she followed his lead, tasting and nibbling. His hands were soon buried in her hair; his warm chest coming down to lie against her, until Kate could feel his heat, a strongly pounding heart, though the thin layers.

When the scratch on the door sounded, it was only Damien who heard it, and he tried to ignore it but could not. He lifted his head, breathing heavy and with lids at half-mast in arousal. "Yes!"

Kate caught her breath, sliding her hands off of him, trying to get her mind clear when the servant called out. "Forgive me, Sir. The Lady's bath is run and her breakfast in the parlor. She told me she rose at dawn. I'll just..."

"Thank you. I shall be right there," Kate called out, and then found her husband looking down at her as the footfalls faded.

"The servants expected an awfully short wedding night," he muttered and flickered his glance over her face.

"Most are I have heard. The virgin's pain m..."

He had leaned up and covered her mouth with his hand. Eyeing her wryly when he took it away and said, "When you have students, the servants, my secretary, your steward, you can lecture. You can explain to your heart's content. But spare me. I've no enjoyment in pain and will make the first time as pleasing for you as possible." He rose up and stood by the bed.

Kate would not look at his nudity. She was so tempted that her eyes hurt from holding them on his face.

Starting to turn away, he paused instead. "Your lips are soft, your tongue like hot silk, you're not all brains and no emotion, my lady. You could bring a man to his knees, kissing that mouth."

When the door shut behind him, Kate barely heard the gasp from the maid and another door closing before the servant was hurrying down the hall. She was lying there smiling smugly, her confidence in herself restored. It was only later, scrubbing her hair, bathing herself in rose scented water that she lay back in the suds and watched the steam, remembering that dizzy heat and drowning hunger that had taken over. Kate sighed and closed her eyes. *All right*. So she would figure some way to live with the fact that she felt more, that he could make her feel more than she had wanted or expected.

\* \* \* \*

Dressed in an empire gown of dark brown silk, with long sleeves, square, low neck line, and having French-braided her hair, before putting the tail of it in a bun. Kate enjoyed her breakfast in the parlor and then left to find the housekeeper. She took a long tour of the elaborate house, two apartments making up sprawling wings, and seeing her husband in the study when that room was viewed.

"May I use the library for my office?" She asked him before leaving.

"Yes." He glanced up from his journal, his gaze going over her gown and matching pumps. "I think there is a small desk there."

She thanked him and closed the door, went on with the tour, But that image of his ruffled hair and half-undone billowing white shirt remained with her for most of the day.

He missed dinner, and she had hers on a tray. Unused to being idle she put on her hooded cape and riding boots and slipped out back. There was some mud from the rains and the air was cold, however she walked toward the stables. Kate felt the hood gently pressing from the wind breathed in the earthy scents, watching the grooms and young lads busily tending horses and cleaning stalls. She stood there eyeing an older man with interest who was treating one of the horses that had a swollen knee, when the thunder of hooves sounded.

It was Damien coming up a rise, keeping to a path, and riding an impressive muscular stallion. The coal black stud had no saddle on its back, and Damien wore only a white shirt, snug riding trousers and boots. As he came closer, and obviously spied her, she saw his hair was mussed, his face ruddy under the tan and his eyes a clear sapphire blue.

He pulled the stallion up close and despite its blows and snorts, Kate reached out to stroke that proud head.

"You ride?"

"Of course." she glanced up at Damien. "Aren't you cold?"

"A bit." He showed those dimples, then reached down a hand.

Kate stared at it, sensing a challenge in him, so she placed her own there and found herself hefted up before him. Sitting across his thighs she caught a whiff of his scent and felt the heat of him in spite of his words. He turned the horse taking the ridge, the path along the slope where the Edrych lands could be viewed.

She was aware that one of his strong arms held her, whilst he guided the mount with one hand. And too aware of his breadth and strength despite the cape she wore.

"How large is Channing Park?" His voice sounded above her.

"Not as large as this. The main estates went to a cousin, along with the title. Channing was a dower land and one of the smallest, though father's favorite. Hunting, fishing, it's been a favorite of many of the lords who would join my father, rustivating they call it." Kate added. "We've raised peacocks and added three greenhouses as well as prime horseflesh to our stables." She was scanning below. "You've impressive land here, Damien."

"Yes." His deep voice vibrated against her hair. "I suppose one thing my father was committed to, was his holdings. "

Kate heard the slight sneer in that. "Your mother had a large family?"

"Yes. Six brothers. Her father was the oldest of eleven.

"And you stayed with them, in Greece?"



"At times. When mother performed in Spain, those...last years. We often lived with an uncle there. He's a wine merchant."

It did not sound like her impression of a mistress's family. But she could picture him amid those men, casting his net out to sea under a warm sun. She could even picture him in Spain, no doubt collecting more of his own ladybirds.

"You had no siblings, obviously?"

She shook her head. "No. My mother had no more after me. Her sister also died young, after miscarriages. Our family was small." He turned the horse and Kate caught sight of the cottage nearest the manor, noting no smoke from the chimney. "Who lives there?"

"No one. It's empty. "

"A waste." she supplied. "You could make use of it."

"Um." There was the merest laughter in his voice before he murmured, "I meet with the steward, I am told, two Friday's out of the month. If you have any suggestions or input, you'll have to attend and put them forth for debate with Sir David."

She arched her neck to see if he was teasing or not. "You are not teasing, are you?"

"No." His eyes held hers. "In spite of dozing off, I heard your theories. If it makes the estates productive I'm sure you'll get a chance to prove them. As to the rest of your ambitions, you've your own income and what you do at Channing, or here to some extent, is your own affair. I have responsibilities enough with these lands

and the mills and other investments. No doubt my father begrudged leaving it to me, but that's hardly the fault of the people who make their living from it."

She searched his face. "That is a very...mature view of things."

He grinned slightly.

She looked away; not able to bear staring at that handsome face, and feeling once more that he was mocking her. As the horse took them toward the stable she felt compelled to mumble. "You cannot be surprised that people expect less than that from you."

"Oh, but I am, Kate. I am." He murmured back.

"As a woman of intellect. I know all about having to prove oneself."

He let her down at the stable and dismounted when a groom came to see to the stallion. "That's the difference then, in your being a lady and myself having lived life a bastard. I didn't care a bloody dam about proving myself. Not to my father, nor to that society in London. I won't be bloody judged by hypocrites who wouldn't know honor if it bit them in the arse. "

They were walking toward the back courtyard entry and Kate glanced over at him. "You are not what I expected."

Damien muttered, "Nor you, my lady."

\* \* \* \*

Kate refreshed herself and went to her chambers to change into a night rail of white lawn, and robe. She combed her hair and tied it back, hearing Damien in the bathing chamber, loudly jesting with the servants who brought his water. She took one of her books to the sitting room, where there was coffee and a roaring fire. After settling in a winged chair with her bare feet on a stool, she attempted to read.

The words weren't registering however. Instead she could hear the thuds and voices behind the wall. Kate lowered the book and sat there looking into the fire whilst he must have finished his bathing and gone to his chambers. That short, shared ride had been enlightening. Another layer to the complicated man, who could be shockingly intimate one moment, and somewhat bitter the next. She had to deal with males to some extent in her life, aside from her father, and the Duke too, as her neighbor, some had all the preconceived ideas about females, and few treated her with any seriousness. Oh, she could not completely write off her steward, he tried to get used to dealing with only her after her father's passing. But it was bred into most men and women too, she had discovered in London.

Kate realized that she had been a mockery and aberration during her debut. Often she had sat at teas and balls wishing herself amid the groups of older men discussing serious subjects, rather than putting herself through the torture of sitting prettily and waving her fan. Having little interest in gossip and no sense of fashion save her own taste and preferences, everything had been a chore, right down to dancing.

She had enjoyed the opera, and plays, the music, and she had tried to make friends at first, and soon realized that other than the Duchess, on the town, those sorts of

relationships were impossible. Females regarded her as unnatural when some serious comment had sprang from her lips, and they had whispered behind fans when she had no comment at all on their pet subjects. Her attitude then had been to get through it. A duty done, in her mind. She'd thought that she could live an independent life afterwards, but in this day, that was not completely possible.

Turning her head as the doors to the suite opened, she watched her husband enter, seeing that he was only in trousers and another lawn shirt, his hair wet and feet bare. Kate grasped how much of having any sort of life depended upon him. This handsome and yes, mocking man. She could tread the line of Viscountess, wife, doing those duties one must, and still have accomplished something herself, couldn't she?

Damien padded across and helped himself to coffee at her elbow. He carried it to the chair, facing her, and propped his feet beside her own.

Kate noted how tanned and strong they were, and she imagined that he shed his boots on the beaches many times. Her gaze moved up, over those legs, where the material of his trousers molded, and up over that lawn shirt with its loose ties. When she encountered his face, she had been caught staring; though he wore an inscrutable expression. His arms lay along the chair with that his coffee cupped in one long fingered hand.

She told herself to look away and make some pretense of reading the book open on her lap, yet those eyes were so vivid that she couldn't look away. When she finally did pull her glance to the flames, she felt his still on her profile.

For Damien it was no chore to indulge in a visual perusal of her features. It occurred to him that with her hair down, simply tied back though, she looked more the innocent she was. Her nose sloped just a bit, and her lips were a true pink, used to sitting in serious lines. Her brows were only a shade lighter than her hair, which made her light brown eyes more stunning moments ago when they'd been on his.

The contrast when he dropped his gaze to the open lapels of her robe, the ties of the gown, was stark. She must have matured rather early for the curves were all woman and fully ripe. He let his gaze fall to her thighs, though she had draped the robe over them, it fell naturally away from having her feet on the stool. The night rail was thin enough to show the shape of incredible legs, that given the warm color of her skin, he could imagine skimming his palms over and holding wide to slide between.

Conscious of a semi arousal, he was glad to have left the tails of his shirt out to pool over his groin. He was comfortable with it, but he knew his bothered bride would think it some deliberate crudity. He laughed mentally at that. Since he had been thinking of both her writings and her comments most of the day. He could take her, true. He was fully aware that most men did the thing as she explained when it came to begetting heirs and consummating marriages. He had consoled a few of those disappointed ladies in London, finding some amusement in the fact that their husbands shunned him in ballrooms, and excluded him from certain clubs. But that challenge was there, certainly.

And he did not believe in wasting opportunity when it came to the pleasures of sex. That this woman was his wife added a bit of spice to it. He wasn't particularly thinking of heirs, but rather this woman who thought she could have sex with as less emotion as a man. Damien had learned to enjoy bedding from his first encounter at fifteen. The Countess had been forty and one of those lovely, ageless, sensual women. Since that time, he took his pleasure as seriously as he did his business, and despite Tom's words and his rep, only indulged in those relationships where the woman wanted more than some titillating thrill of sleeping with the black sheep bastard. He knew the difference, and he didn't waste his time with the latter.

When Kate turned her head and picked up her cup to finish her coffee, before she could pick up the book it appeared she was going to read, he leaned forward and took it, closing it and setting it on the small table. Sliding his feet from the stool he ignored her startled look-- that wary mistrust that amused him, and gently pushed her own feet off the padded structure, and placed his hands on the arms of her chair, looking down at her upturned face.

"How much *do* you know about mating?" He mused aloud.

"The mechanics are... fairly obvious to anyone wh..." She swallowed when he lifted his hand and stroked his hand down her hair, bringing the tie with it and laying it aside.

Damien could sense her stiff mistrust, even her skepticism, but more, he could sense that she was fighting being affected by him. "Like kissing?"

She muttered, "That was different. One cannot..."

He had cupped the side of her face, intrigued by his talkative bride's inability to finish a sentence when he touched her. Letting his thumb caress under her lip, he murmured, "Part your legs."

"Here...in a chair!"

He would not laugh at that strangled outburst. Damien instead held her gaze and slid his palm down until he reached the ties of her robe. He undid them blindly and pushed it off her shoulders, feeling his palm tingle when he actually touched skin past those ribbon straps of her gown. He knew the moment she decided to cooperate and set up slightly so the garment fell away completely, likely her insistence at being an equal partner. That was fine by Damien. He could see not only her deep cleavage but below the ribbon-threaded edge of the bodice, her nipples, blush pink, were all but visible.

Feeling the proximity of the fire, he touched his fingertips to her lips. Then knew he confused her when he straightened and sat down in his chair again. But he said, "Stand up, Kate. Walk over here toward me."

She stood and took those four steps, giving him a clear view of her lush body as the firelight turned the gown transparent. The glow of her warm hair sliding over her shoulders sped Damien's heartbeat. But he made himself attend her expression, which was still a mixture of guarded and defiant.

He leaned up and cupped the side of her legs, skimming the gown up and brining her to sit on his lap at the same time.

“Damien,” she protested stiffly and grasped his arms as her lush bottom settled on his upper thighs.

He ignored it and leaned back, lightly brushing his fingers across that low bodice. With soft strokes, he watched the chills rise on her skin and the nipples grow harder. Her eyes were widening and narrowing as the sensations were registering.

Leaning forward he kissed her, soft at first, running his tongue over the surface while his hands caressed her exposed thigh. He delved inside deep when he delved too under the material and rubbed her hips and backside, and not until she moaned slightly, did he lift his head and regard her again.

\* \* \* \*

Kate was part mortified, part stunned by the sensations her position caused. She was bare under the gown, and having her legs spread so obviously with his between was almost too explicit to bear. She was fully aware that he looked at her nipples and that he was touching parts of her not touched before. And the kiss, the delve inside her mouth, while his warm palms went from her knees to her backside nearly gave her heart failure.

Feeling that he was studying, watching, weighing her reaction, she tried to keep that challenged emotion in the mix. But there were too many new and unexpected feelings racing over her skin, inside her, for her mind to think clearly.

When he began kissing her again, fully, erotically, Kate's hands gripped the chair arms while his seemed to roam at will. Soon his laving tongue and head slanting had her dizzy and breathing hard.



He skimmed his hands to her shoulders. When she felt the gown being pulled down, the straps sliding down her arms, she removed her hands from the chair and tried not to think of the moment he let go and it pooled at her hips. But her nudity was obvious and his hands on her breasts brought another moan. She dreaded the moment that came next, when he released her mouth and leaned back in the chair again.

Kate wouldn't open her eyes at first, but that did not keep her from biting her lip when his fingers flexed around the globes, and it didn't prevent that sound when he had slid them to the tips and was rubbing her nipples between his fingers. The echo of pleasure that sparked between her legs did open her eyes. And she found herself staring at his half-mast ones in slight panic.

His face a study of sensual curiosity, he slid his hands down, under her breast and over her ribs, her small waist and to her hips. "You are stunningly fashioned, Kate. Your body is incredibly beautiful."

*She had not expected that.*

His hands skimmed back up and she looked down to see the contact between his tanned fingers and her milky skin, to see him brush the pad of one over her nipple and to watch amazingly as it peaked painfully tight.

"You should glory in being so obviously feminine." He murmured, and she glanced up to meet his waiting gaze. Damien added, "Viewing it is a pleasure. Touching your skin is arousing beyond what I expected. I'll have to paint you sometime. You have the kind of body that feeds men's fantasies."

That was beyond anything Kate expected, and she certainly had not seen her body in such a way. But no retort came to her lips, because she knew with some instinct that he was not mocking. "Damien..." She did not know what she was going to say.

His warm, very strong hands were moving over her torso as he held her gaze and husked, "Does my touch pleasure you, Kate?"

She reluctantly nodded.

Damien brushed his thumb over her navel. "Just because consummation is a duty, doesn't mean you and I cannot enjoy it. " His hand moved down, fingers rubbing that thin material against her curls. "I'm going to pleasure you, wife. And I am going to feel pleasure in doing it. Whatever notion you had in agreeing to wed me, this part of it isn't something that anyone can dictate. Those bloody rules don't belong in the bedroom, sweet. Or between lovers. Call it mating or sex, I will not deny myself what is to be had in it, nor will I allow you to."

With that, she found herself kissed quite differently. His hands came up and cupped her head and his mouth aggressively, possessively, settled on hers. Kate grasped his shoulders, having her mouth and senses ravished during the next incredible moments, to the point she could not think of a bloody rational thing.

When he lifted his head, it was only to score his mouth across her jaw and down her throat, his palms again skimming and molding her torso and his moist breaths decidedly more labored.

Kate felt as if she were anchoring herself in a storm. Somewhat dazed, she cried out, heard herself do it,

when his lips clamped warm over her nipple and he began suckling. Hands in his cool wavy hair, back arched, she began to tremble.

He switched to the other, pulling, licking, and scraping his teeth over them gently before suckling more.

“My God.” Kate struggled to get hold herself.

But her husband looked at her, leaving her breasts damp, nipples trembling and murmured, “Touch me. Kate. Touch me.”

And as if helpless she was kissing his beautiful dark face, running her lips over his brow and cheek, under his chin, while her hands widened the neck of his shirt and slid under. There was a moment in that hot burst of erotic fever that he helped her pull the shirt over his head. Her mouth and hands moved over muscled shoulders and fingers scraped his taunt nipples, while the taste of his hot flesh brought more and more hunger, to the point Kate was distantly shocked at it, but still unable to restrain it.

Somehow in that chair he was cupping her buttocks, arching up enough to slide her against his hard arousal while Kate laved up his sinewy throat, as he arched his head back. The friction fueled her already shocking need and Kate grasped his hair, pulling his head back further while biting and suckling just under his ear.

When his fingers slid between them, found her sex, and began to slide and rub, Kate froze a moment, panting loudly against his skin.

He rolled his head and whispered roughly in her ear, “So soft, so wet, so hot. ”

Her fingers released his hair, her forehead against his shoulder she rasped breathless, "It feels...strange...I..."

His lips brushed her hair; the hand on her buttock went almost between them. "You're going to come."

"I...can..."

"Yes." He whispered just before his finger sank slick and slow into her.

"Oh God. Wait...wait." She rolled her head to the side, her fingers digging into his shoulders while her inner muscles clamped and milked against it. "I didn't expect this. I can't."

He slid his hand up, grasping her hair lightly and tilting her head back to meet her gaze. Kate saw his lids heavier, his eyes burning brighter. That finger moved in and out slow several times while he watched her flushed face. He brought it out and up, between her curls, slicking against some ultra sensitive place. "Feel that?"

"Yes." Her teeth clamped shut.

His smile was strained, "Relax and fall into it."

She did not believe that possible, and said so. But he kept alternating until she was closing her eyes and, though trembling hard, arched her neck and felt the pressure building and building and narrowing.

"Beautiful, Kate...Yes...your expression...your face shows it. Come after it, luv. "

The wave seemed to come over her at once, it was there and swallowing her whole with a bright burning. It burst through her, dancing up her spine until she wasn't aware of anything before finding herself lying against his chest, his arms around her.

Heavy eyed and awed, Kate looked at the fire, feeling a surreal emotion that she was in one piece and still herself. There was a pleasant fullness; a throb of gentle contractions inside of her that she instinctively knew was her body preparing to receive his.

She protested when he stood and shifted to carry her in his arms. "I'm too heavy."

Damien snorted and made his way with her to his chambers. Kate had a vague image of black and gold before she was placed on his bed. She watched him light two lamps so that the warm tones glowed from the hangings and furnishings. There was scent lingering, his mysterious aroma wafting through the room with the current of intimacy, and that erotic awareness that she was in his domain, clearly a masculine chamber, with all those deeper bouquets and colors.

When he came to the bed, Kate was again reminded of his height and build, the fact that he certainly reeked virility and potency, a sensual kind of knowledge she now knew was real. He leaned over, watching her face as he pulled away the rest of her gown, then lingered, gazing at her upper thighs, the curls he had sensually played in for her pleasure.

Dropping the gown in the floor, back-lit by that amber light, he began unlatching his trousers. Her heart leapt and then fluttered as he revealed flat abs and having

pushed the trousers completely off, a fully flushed sex with shiny black hair nestling at the base.

Her gaze went down defined thighs, carved and powerful and back up to what was obviously not portrayed accurately in drawings and statues.

"It looks different."

He choked on a laugh, and Kate's eyes flew to his, her flush coming as she amended, "I mean...not like the statues and drawings."

He looked down at himself with a cocked brow, obviously not modest at all. "If I did not know what you meant, and I do, I'd be unmanned by now."

She had dropped her gaze to the smooth head, the deep peach crown and thick shaft that was silken looking and veined. The very sight of it was so sexual. The fact that he was not modest or covering it, rather forced her to be equally calm and not clap her hands over her eyes, as she was inclined. She watched muscles flex as he came upon the bed and relaxed beside her, sitting up higher, so that she had that hard part of him in her plain view.

His hand touched her hair softly and she heard his voice above her, "There is no where you can't touch me, Kate."

She took that to mean he wanted her to. So she raised her hand and let the pads her fingers touch the smooth crown. His breath hissed, but when she glanced at him, it was to find him merely biting down on his lip.

Kate got to her elbow and this time softly traced the length before cupping him in her hand. She felt the pulse

and heat, heard his soft groan even as he was fingering her hair gently, apparently both praising and letting her know he liked what she was doing.

Kate removed her hand, saw his eyes go to her swaying breasts as she slid up to lay beside him. "I'm not afraid."

His gaze met hers. "I know." he brushed her cheek with the back of his fingers. "I may be though."

Her scoff was answered with his dry smile. "I've never taken a virgin."

"But you sa..."

He shook his head slowly. "I said I knew things, not that I'd actually done them. " He leaned up and slid her down so that he was leaning over her. "My first lover told me the trick was to keep a woman wet and aroused...so the sting comes and goes fast."

Kate frowned.

He laughed. "I should not speak of lovers to my wife?"

"No. You shouldn't."

He caressed her cheek. "A man doesn't reach my age without them."

"Nor your rep."

"True. But only half of the talk came close to the reality." His thumb brushed her lips. "I was more boy than man when I was tutored in pleasures, and I avoided virgins, having relationships with only those women who wanted the same thing."

"Can we skip this conversation?" Kate suddenly could not bear the thought of him doing things with other women, nor of giving them such pleasures as he'd done her.

"I assumed your reasonable mind would demand it," He teased, then cupped her breast before murmuring, "You wouldn't show your shock even if you felt it, stubborn Kate."

She swallowed again, feeling his hot skin and warm hand. "I'm surprised... See? I can admit there are some things I do not know, nor did I expect."

His palm went down her stomach. "There'll be more..."

She more than enjoyed his kiss, and too easily parted her legs for the hand that wedged between them. He drew out both, the strokes and the kissing; bringing that fever back to her blood until her heart was slamming. When she was obviously wet and slightly arching to the soft thrust of his finger, Damien moved between her legs, raising his head as he braced his forearms beside her head.

Looking down as she glanced up he husked, "Slowly..." Before she felt the crown, warm and sleek at the entry of her sex.

Her hands on his taunt sides, too aware of his hot body between her legs, Kate could not look away as he entered a few inches, stretching her and yet pleasuring her with an in and out that was easing him deeper and deeper.

"Hurt?" he asked tightly.



"No." She whispered. But an inch more and she flexed her nails in him. "Yes."

His body tense, frame trembling, he stared at her, "You are so tight and warm... so soft and wet."

She felt the moisture increase down there. And when he flexed in, she felt the tug and sting that preceded him imbedding himself.

"That hurts." Kate couldn't breathe a moment.

He pulled out completely and slid down to kiss her deep and passionate. The throb eased while his mouth turned her bones to mush. But he slid lower, suckling her breasts, stroking her, and when he had his mouth between her legs, Kate tried to pull his head up.

Using his hands to keep her legs wide, he kissed that sensitive spot and laved it several times causing her to jerk at the sensation. "Don't fight, Kate," he said before sliding his hands under her backside, lifting her and proceeding to suckle and lave, to run his tongue from that high spot down to her entry where he flickered it and kissed her there too.

"This can't be normal...it can't be..." She groaned, her hands now bunched in the covers as fire raced under her skin.

He ignored her and moved his head round, sensually devoured her, until Kate felt the climax building. It came when he slid his hands inward, up to hold her curls open so the flat of his tongue could rasp softly and swirl around those nerves. She was engulfed again, unaware

until she realized he was over and inside her, buried deep when those ripples faded.

He moved slowly, all the way out and back in. Kate's knees lifted, sinking him deeper, and though there was a dull bit of pain, nothing compared to the actual mating, the movement of his body, his sex in her. And, nothing really mattered, because he was talking, murmuring, praising with a kind of desperate explicitness that did not end until he whispered, "Christ...oh...Kate," before his frame shook and shuddered against her.

\* \* \* \*

She had dozed after refreshing; intending to go to her rooms, but her husband had carried her again to his. Kate opened her eyes, feeling him lying behind her, his arm around her waist keeping her close.

Looking out at the shadowed room, she thought of what they had done. Somewhere inside she groaned, realizing that he was right. In the bedroom he was dominant, because he made her feel things that she did not expect, and that pleasure could be addictive. Just replaying it mentally brought a tingle to her nipples and moisture below. She'd never be able to go back to ignorance. He had known that.

He had bathed and the scent of manly soap filled her lungs as she sighed, then breathed in deep. He hadn't bothered with clothing and denied her the gown before putting her to bed.

*It was not supposed to be this way.* She kept telling herself that. But it was, and there was no going back or pretending he was going to be any different. Kate understood the lure of affairs now. She even conceded

that sexual relationships made sense. *But when he had spoken of lovers...*

She groaned and rubbed her face against the pillow. She was thinking entirely too much about him. After the heir was conceived he'd take up his amusements and affairs and work goals would keep her busy. This was simply the first taste of a mutual attraction. Sooner or later, he would tire of it and the newness would fade. Then, the life she had planned could be a reality.

### Chapter 3

She was in the library, at her desk, working, when Damien came for her at noon. He stood by the doorway wearing trousers, knee high boots and a wool shirt. "If you'd like to tour the farms with me, change into something warm."

She put the ledger down and slid her chair back. "Letters came from my solicitor and steward." She picked them up off the desk, still sealed. "They're addressed to you, likely the settlement and reports on the estate."

He took them, merely glancing at the script. "We'll go over them later; I'll meet you in the study."

Not about to pass up a tour since the weather had cleared, Kate hurried up and threw open her trunks. She found her trousers and boots, a wool jumper that she pulled over her cotton shirt. After stripping, braiding her hair and dressing, she fit on a cap and went back to the study.

\* \* \* \*

Damien wasn't surprised to see her in trousers, somehow he expected it. He motioned to the missives he had read. "I've made a copy of the accounts in my own ledgers. I'll have Henry leave these on your desk."

Since he didn't have to share that information with her and since the settlement was completely his, she was glad he'd offered and nodded. They walked out to the foyer where he handed her a short coat, familiar in style to her from the sailors she'd seen in various villages.

Walking outside, she also caught that look he shot her, when he handed her into the carriage, instead of expecting her to sit a horse after last night.

Settled in, facing each other, and each at a window, she murmured, "Thank you. For inviting me."

His blue eyes went over her face, the strands of her hair blowing loose. "I can't promise you that they'll take any of your comments seriously, but it's up to you, Kate, to make them respect your ideas by making sensible ones, having something intelligent to comment. I know you have studied, but a farmer has scant conversation and little time for experimentation. Whatever you say, it has to make sense in the now."

Kate nodded, understanding perfectly what he was saying. As Viscountess she would get respect for her title, as far as her mind went, if she couldn't offer up something constructive, then she'd do well to keep her mouth shut.

It was Tom driving the carriage, a servant who seemed to fill multiple roles, and one who Damien obviously preferred. He let them out at the first lane, and Kate kept up with Damien's stride, her gaze seeing the four men awaiting them, whom she understood, were brothers.

The introduction was a bit awkward as the men eyed her attire and then her outstretched hand with some confusion. Kate shook those beefy members and looked around. "A nice farm, very well cared for. The four of you are obviously an asset to Edrych."

They stuck out their chest and thanked her, but Kate knew when the real business and tour started, it was

Damien they put their comments to. They toured barns and pens, inspected the grain sheds, and walked over a kilometer of muddy field.

Kate sat on a rock, in weak sun later, while the men, on their haunches, fingered dried grass and talked crops. She listened because she was genuinely interested, and only asked a few questions about the sheep and wool before nodded and going silent.

Five more farms, and she had a whole other impression of Damien to add to his multifaceted personality. He ran his hands over some of the animals with an expert eye, looked at everything from ditches to bridges, and climbed upon roofs. She watched him heft one of the massive sacks of grain and help one of the farmers load a long wagon. They laughed and talked, leaving Kate to chat a moment with the good wife, who was thankfully practical and down to earth.

A young lad of about ten brought them fresh bread, wrapped in a napkin, and cold ale. They leaned against the carriage and ate; handing the napkins back which Damien put coins in.

\* \* \* \*

For Damien it was also enlightening, though the tenants were obviously taken aback by Kate's attire. She lifted children on her hip and carried them along to look at goats, poultry and pigs. Then, she looked over one of the draft horses and pointed out an abscess, which she promptly advised how to treat. Her hair was half-loose from the braid and her boots marred with mud. She left her coat in the carriage the last visit. He watched her walk a bit away whilst he was talking to the farmer,

noting with wry humor that even mussed and muddy, she was a handsome, tempting woman.

They were inspecting a bridge on the way home. He and Kate disagreed on the means to prevent erosion. The argument lasted a good while and even when he saw her point, Damien kept rebutting just to watch her stomp over and point out the crumbling rocks, looking like she wanted to throw one at his head. He glanced at Tom, who rolled his eyes, before he conceded that Kate had the better idea.

Hands on her hips, she glared at him. "You've got a hard head, haven't you? "

"Apparently." He grinned and then gave her hand up the bank and back into the carriage.

They arrived at the manor and left their boots at the back door, taking the rear hall up to the bathing chambers.

Kate's bath was prepared first, but he waited until the maid left and invaded.

Hair wet, body covered in oily bubbles, she watched him remove his clothing. "You'll smell like rose water."

He was completely nude and moved to sit behind her, causing the water to spill out. "I like the smell of roses."

It was such an intimate thing, bathing. Kate could not help their bodies rubbing as he soaped his hair and rinsed it behind her. When he stood to wash, she made as if to get out.

"Reach me that pail, "He murmured.

Kate reached down for the pail of clear water, standing there-and watching, as he took it and poured it over his darkly tanned body. Damien wiped the water from his eyes and slicked his hair back. Their gazes touched. Though she was getting chilled, Kate knew there had to be the same heat in hers and Damien's held.

He stepped out and patted himself somewhat free of water, before fixing the drying towel on his hips. Holding the other wide he motioned for her.

She allowed him to wrap the towel around her, and lift her out. And though she'd brought fresh clothing in, he didn't pick it up as he carried her to his rooms.

The fire crackled, flames casting shadows on the wall and making water glisten on their skin. Damien handed her a comb. Kate stood before the fire, using it on her wet hair, hearing him move to the vanity and feeling the complete intimacy of the room. When he joined her, she watched the wavy strands dry and wave to his shoulders, before she eyed the ridge of hair from his navel.

She was a bit startled when a knock sounded at the door, but Damien opened it still in his towel, and then spoke to the servant before wheeling in a cart.

"Put this on." He handed her one of his shirts.

She dropped the towel, pulled the shirt over her head while he prepared wine before handing her a glass. They sat on the bed, the platter of meat, fruit, bread and cheese between them, and ate, sipped from their glasses. With only the tic of the mantle clock and the pop of sparks from the fire breaking the thick silence.



When she was full, Kate carried her glass to the cart. She stretched out at the bottom of the bed, watching him as he finished, feeling a flush inside and out from simply that.

Damien drained his glass and took both it and the tray to the cart before stretching out at the top, facing her, with a foot between them. That is all they did for the longest time, lay there, obviously looking up and down, since the shirt hid little that the thin material may as well not be there. But just as often it was eyes meeting eyes, and that hum of attraction thickening in the air.

"You've had many.... lovers?"

"A few." He answered distracted, eyeing her hand where it absently smoothed the comforter.

"And your mother..."

"Was faithful to the Viscount. He ceased to support her after awhile. She'd always made her own income and lived well. But he took her under his protection when she was very young, and to mother, it implied an... ownership." He shook his head. "She had men lay their heart and fortunes at her feet. But she was true to the old man."

"The Viscount wasn't?"

"I've no idea. He wasn't an intimate man. He could be cold blooded, as I discovered, because he would neither confirm or deny the marriage had taken place, nor supply the proof...until his death obviously. It affected no one but me. His power to keep people from talking, including my mother, says something. I don't blame her,

she would have walked through hell for him, though I couldn't understand my mother's feelings. It is likely the only thing we argued about. She never forced me on him, but was pleased he had me educated, and in his fashion, tried to conform me to the standards of a gentleman. To her, that implied his love for her."

"Love." Kate sighed. "People often confuse what it is."

"How would you know that?"

She shrugged. "Commitment, fidelity, all that love and devotion doesn't seem to bring that or happiness. These days, the more sad and cruel that supposed love is, the more the poets romanticize it. Who wants that? Pain brings one to depths, not transports them to some higher place. "

"You didn't love your father?"

"I suppose that counts. I bonded with him. He nurtured things in me that he wasn't required to foster in a daughter...But we're speaking of man and woman in general."

His gaze was scolding. "You are barely a grown woman, Kate. You can't write off emotions that you've never been vulnerable to. "

She leaned up on her elbow. "I don't believe a man like you puts love on that higher plane either."

His brow arched. "Just because I never fell in love, doesn't mean I don't believe it."

"No. Rake's don't think like that, Damien."

He considered her before saying, "I'm sensitive to certain things. As harsh as life can be, there is beauty in a muse, something we cherish, something that moves us, as nothing else will, that which makes us sing with passion or paint with it. It's not the word love that has no truth, Kate. But the people who toss it out so idly."

"All right. I'll give you that." She thought a moment. "But it still doesn't make people faithful or committed."

"It did my mother."

Kate sighed. "And brought her grief. So, all right, I may be completely wrong. I'll concede that possibility. I still have no faith in those sorts of emotions. Having a practical mind, intelligence, it would save many from those unhappy experiences, if they would accept more truths about human nature."

"My wife, the cynic." He smiled and shook his head.

"Skeptic," she countered. "Which means I've gone from being adamant, to not willing to be accused of having a completely closed mind. See how I have progressed?"

Damien chuckled, closing the distance. Pushing her flat to her back, he leaned over and murmured, "Do you believe there is more to sex now?"

"Yes," She answered, looking at his glowing eyes. "I will admit that I cannot remain detached when you kiss me, touch me."

He kissed her, leisurely and soft, and stroked the top of her hair. "I am not detached either, Kate. I don't want to be." He leaned down, kissing her again, more erotic, and

moving his head in that way that sent Kate's heart tripping.

His hand slid down her side, fingers splayed on her hip, and kissing just under her ear, he whispered gruffly, "I wanted to take you a dozen times today. In that muddy field...that warm stable... and under that bloody bridge. I wanted to run my hands through your hair, to feel your breasts in my palms."

*She'd wanted him too, every time she had looked at him.* Kate's arms went round him. She answered his kiss and soon they were rolling until she was under him, the kiss deep and passionate, as their hands skimmed and fingers flexed.

The intimacy and eroticism increased while they tasted and touched. His hand reached down, stroking her leg, sliding up under the shirt to her hip. Hers moved over his back, into his hair, back down to the taunt tops of his buttocks.

Kate trembled, panted and arched. He undid the ties and widened the shirt, laving and suckling her breasts. Sometime during that, she saw their shadows and felt an incredible sense of awe, that kissing, laving, touching, and the feel of him, seemed to make her heady and light, take her to some primal level where the world faded, and only his feel and taste filled the void.

He moved down her, kissing softly, down the inside of her thighs, back up the sides, and turning her over to nip at her nape. He pulled the shirt off her and nibbled his way across her spine and buttocks, then turned her again and began to stroke her with his fingers, until she moaning and moving her hips in counterpoint.

When he slipped between her legs, it was with a groan, and this time Kate clamped her legs on his sides, grasped his forearms and arched to meet each thrust.

Damien had a rhythm that slanted him into her body, sank him in deep, and brought him out measured, over and over, while his breathing and her sexual sound, every time he buried to the hilt, mingled in the room. The pleasure coursed through him, each time, threatening to steal his control. He had to focus in order to keep from submerging, and the effort was more difficult because he knew she was enjoying him, and she was riding him as much as he was her.

His motions sped, and at one point he leaned back, getting to his knees so that he could look at her. It was a mistake. For the ecstasy on her features, those parted lips and glowing eyes; the pleasure there undid him. He thrust faster and faster, watching her, and the climax snuck up on him, it raced up his thighs, exploding brilliant and exquisite from his sex, and went through his blood from head to foot.

Heavy and sluggish afterwards, he arose and used the wash pan. When he came to bed, he saw Kate's tense face, felt her limbs trembling, and could tell from her hand over her eyes, the tremor in her fingers, she was poised at some edge of her climax.

He leaned up and husked. "Get to your knees, Kate."

She moved her arm, looking at him with dazed eyes, tension around her mouth. But she got to her knees.

He slid between on his back, using her hips to set her down on his mouth. Then he thrust his tongue in her, began moving her to ride it, alternating with laves across

those nerves. He heard that sound, her muffled half scream before he sipped the moisture of her climax. When she'd fallen to the side, he leaned over her, licking his lips of sticky musk.

Kate's lashes lifted.

Damien smiled lazily. "You must let me do that more often. "

She groaned with a dull flush. But he chuckled, gathering her back against him. Holding her as they slept.

## Chapter 4

The following weeks, Kate struggled to keep a routine, used to having a schedule that was running the household, visiting neighbors and spending hours researching. Her leisure time normally was given to her drawings of the buildings, and laying out the plans for her future. Now, it was taken up by Damien.

They normally breakfasted and went to their respective offices. At times he came in to show her some figures and projections, or she would go there, and inquire about some entry in the estate books. They went out, riding, inspecting, and she noted that many times Damien went out after lunch; she'd see him with Tom, by the stables, talking, laughing while he brushed down the stud.

But nothing was really routine. He had made love to her in the sitting room chair one night, on her own bed the next. One day, whilst they were out riding, he'd pulled off her mare, onto his horse, and brought her climax in broad daylight.

He kissed her in the hallway, on the stairs, and had not missed a night taking her body to heights of passion, and leaving whispered words in her mind, the sound of his voice-- always telling her how it felt, how beautiful she was, how he could stay inside her forever.

One night in particular, touched Kate in some unfathomable way. He had carried her from the bathing room, rubbed her down with her lotions; lain suckling her breasts until she'd thought she'd scream. He had laid her back and had touched her whilst watching himself,

and watching her. And when she'd come, he'd loved her there, so passionate and sweet, so obviously finding pleasure in it, that she had felt that transference of those emotions emitting from him.

Something in Kate responded to the fact that he not only enjoyed being inside her, but he wanted to pleasure and stroke, to taste her. It was not the sort of selfish hedonistic sex she'd expected. He reveled in his desire, true, but as often as not, he reveled in hers.

\* \* \* \*

Spring took them to her estate, Channing Park, where they toured the lands, and met with the steward. Damien liked the place so well, the grounds and woodlands, the greenhouses, that she had built, that he urged her to design them for Edrych too. They hunted and rode, and picnicked by streams. They visited the Duke and Duchess, who were obviously curious about a more socially polite and wholly different Viscount Edrych.

Kate thought she would feel differently going to her home, but it seemed rather strange, and not the same at all, being there with him as his wife. There were places she loved. She sat at her desk, the desk that was her fathers, approving the last of the blueprints for the school that would be built, overseeing it, thanks to Damien finding the right people, after rounds to the neighbors supplied him with names.

Making love with him there, and he wanted to often, brought a different feeling too, as doing that with him anywhere, at any time, was an intense experience. Kate thought sometimes that he seemed to be aroused by the strangest things, seeing her in the stables, or having dirt up to her elbows in the greenhouse. He had tackled her



to the ground one day whilst walking in the fields and brought her to an exquisite climax, and she found him watching her when her lashes lifted, looking at her... with that enigmatic expression in his eyes.

She purchased ten acres to build a hospital, which the Duchess would gather other sponsors for. Again Damien found the contacts, went to the meetings at a local inn with her. It was like that--those plans she made, on her own, realizing that her husband did more than simply allow it, he participated, whilst deferring to her ideas and diagrams, not changing a thing, but seeking out the workmen and masons, joining her at lunch with local physicians; and for the schools, the instructors she would need to staff it.

He kept reality in perspective for her, because it would take a couple of years to see it all to come together, and Kate felt she had waited so long. But Damien reminded her, not only in words, but going over figures and projections, showing her how to be realistic in her expectations, so that she could be happy to finally start those things that interested her, and see that as progress and accomplishment.

They had arguments that were not really arguments, more like exchanges of opinion and debates. Kate kept waiting for him to mock her, but he was actually baiting her, to hear how well she could argue her point. And she could. She kept waiting for him to get tired of her too, to not be serious about his duties, and he was serious, still insisted they share the same bed every night. *He was nothing like she imagined, and there were times she forgot she ever had the worst expectations about him, because she enjoyed him so much.*

Their second visit, it was the Duchess who pointed out the inevitable, that they would have to go to London, open the townhouse, and attend some of the ton's functions. The Duke would sponsor Damien, at some of the clubs where he'd been denied entry before. It was a test, Kate knew, that would be proven out by the number of invites and the sorts of entertainment they would be welcomed at.

Since he had business to see to there anyway, and since Kate had to go up early enough to have a proper wardrobe sewn. They made plans to go in August.

However, it was yet June at Edrych. Kate had a quiet hour to herself after the demanding rush of spring; planting of crops and registering newborns in the breeding operations, the usual dealing with repairs to cottages, some disasters with flooding, and births and deaths amid their tenants.

Damien had awakened her that morning with his soft mouth going up her inner thighs roused her sensually from sleep, and giving her the most delicious, drawn out climax.

With the upper windows flung wide now, standing there in a muslin cream skirt and soft sleeveless blouse, she closed her eyes, to experience the sun and breathe the scents of summer, to absorb the sounds; of birds, a soft bleat of sheep, and some distant, trailing off, of male laughter. Arms around her waist, the breeze blew her hair back and she felt the caress from the hem teasing over the tops of her bare feet.

Before her marriage, she would not have relished those things as she did now. Would not have noticed the flutter of light material against her bodice, or the scent of grass and roses wafting up. She would not have felt pleasurable chills at the wispy skirt pressing the cool silk underskirt against her thighs. Kate lowered her hands, then raised them to lift up her hair, tilting her head back while those little waves of sun and wind undulated over her from head to toe.

How long she stood, a half hour perhaps, lost in that quiet moment before lifting her lashes, then moving to sit in the window. She raised her skirts to her knees, propping her bare feet on the on the ledge, looking out, over the emerald hills dotted with sheep, not thinking of crops and soil and animals-- But rather Damien.

If he was not off, delayed by business, he always sought her out. He always touched her, even when he was too tired to barely hold his eyes open, as he'd worked physically along with the men. And yet, he came to her each time, and it was if he could not help but touch her.

Kate had a memory, of one bright noon filtering through her mind. The warm spring day he had taken her there, with sun filtering in and the breeze caressing him. He'd been sensual, unhurried, holding her hands by her head, looking at her often. And, she had come apart in some incredible way, unraveled inside, from that expression, the sensual movements of his strong body, the intensity that was sluggish, yet more than those feverish times they were so famished that it was over swiftly.

The rogue in him was reserved for the way he sexually teased her, sometimes deliberately to exasperate her. She was catching on, that he did that, normally to try and make her blush and being rather contrary. She saw

nothing of the rakehell really, but rather the verve in him; when he worked hard, laughed with the servants, and shunned most formality with tenants and locals alike.

He had no modesty with his body, but was confident, yet not swaggering, merely natural and at ease-, earthy, she thought. During sex, he was sensual, erotic, passionate in ways that made her tremble. Yes, intimate; not allowing her to put that mental distance in her mind, because he gave as much as he took. There was an abandon in his beautiful face and body, that touched her deeper than skin and bone.

\* \* \* \*

Sometime later, a crackling sound made Kate glance toward the bed. She'd not heard Damien come in, but he sat up against the headboard, a large pad on his knees and drawings scattered where he'd finished and taken them out.

She could tell he was in a deep muse. He frowned slightly when she got down and walked toward him. Leaning over, Kate saw the images of herself, realizing he'd been in the chamber somewhere when she'd stood too, for there was one sketch of her; head back, hands holding her hair up. It did not look like her as Kate thought of herself, and one in pastel chalk in particular drew her gaze a long time.

The woman looked delicate, sensual, feminine, caught up in some ethereal and lovely daydream. Yet all of them were that way, the one of her with her skirts up, the hem fluttering, and her hair blowing back. Her pose in all, her expression, one of hushed bliss, of being lost in the memories, transported beyond the moment.

She glanced at Damien. "Are there more of these?"

He set the pad aside and wiped his hands on a damp cloth, eyeing her with his own inscrutable expression. "Yes."

Something tightened in the pit of her stomach. Feeling strangely detached from herself a moment, Kate flicked her glance over his wet hair, a scrape on his knuckles, the open white shirt he wore with black trousers. She tried to tell herself that he'd interjected things into the drawings that were his own impressions and assumptions-- artist, poets, composers, did that. But when he left the bed, went to his rooms, and came back, laying both watercolors and oil paintings on the coverlet, Kate's mouth tasted dust, her heartbeat so hard it was suffocating.

One was of her sleeping, lying on her stomach, a drape of champagne silk across her hips. Her hair was mussed over the pillow. The look to her curved lips, her face, one of a woman who'd just been made love to thoroughly.

Another, Kate stared at evoked the memory of the night he had taken her hands, running them over her own body while he murmured in that explicit yet wholly erotic way, saying those things that should have made her blush, but made her burn instead. He'd captured mentally that image, of her in the amber glow of lamps, her body nude and her back arched, her hand on her breast, one between her legs.

She tuned away and heard Damien behind her, gathering up the art and putting things away. Yet Kate stood stiff by the window, her skin stretched with struggle and her heart thudding, fighting the truth, of

what *he* saw, the perception he showed of her emotions, things she had never meant to reveal, or to feel.

Damien spoke quietly behind her, from somewhere near the doorway. "I read something from your trunk, that first night. I set out to prove your theories wrong, to show you that there is more pleasure... in not distancing yourself during sex. That some people cannot. To show you, that making love is possible. When you are passionate, and feel desire. Loving is something you can't always control."

"I'm not in love." She shook her head, feeling her eyes burning.

He was silent a moment, then murmured, "You look at me, watch me, during sex. Do I ever look that way to you?"

She swallowed.

"Kate?"

*Oh God... Oh God...* "Yes." she rasped, feeling tight all over.

"Then... I'm not in love either." .

Kate stood there until the door clicked shut. Then, she ran to the bed and flung herself across it. She did not cry, hadn't wept in years. And yet it burst out like a flood that shook her frame and poured from her insides out. She gripped the pillow and sobbed into the silk, until there were only raw sounds coming from her throat. It felt like something crumbling painfully in there, and it felt like confusion and pain, a sense of no longer knowing herself.

His touch had changed her, somehow, he had transformed her. She was scared, so frightened, to have to find out what that truth meant.

\* \* \* \*

Damien heard her. He stood at the window in the sitting room, letting that same warm wind and scent wash over him. He recognized, long before today, that he was no longer simply challenging her opinions. He couldn't name the hour, the time, in bed or at their work, when he had stopped thinking that way. He only knew that provoking, arguing, agreeing, and kissing-- he and Kate had altered from whomever they were the day they had wed.

It was harder with Kate. She talked about everything *but* intimate feelings, and could converse all day with him on various subjects. In the bedroom, touching wherever they touched, she never whispered a word aside from his name. And God knew, he read every inflection in her tone; how she said it, what emotion was behind it.

Somehow in the busyness of the life they had, the responsibilities took large gaps of his time, though he enjoyed and was interested in the ideas that Kate would see to frustration with her projects. He had watched her, here, and at Channing Park, at the Duchess's house, at meetings with the masons and architect. But even while he admired her ambitions, he was always, always reaching for the woman, the feminine soul, and the glimpses of desire and passion that she displayed only when they touched.

There was a point, when he got beyond her barriers and she would kiss and caress him, clutch him to her, put fire on his skin with those soft lips. And it was *that* Kate

who turned his blood and bones to glowing cinders, evoking a fever in his body, a rush to his blood, sending his mind over edges of bliss so far, that his strength and experience deserted him. He had once commented that she could bring him to his knees, but it was no jest. He was on them already where his wife was concerned.

Damien noted the silence when her crying ceased, and he thought he knew too, *why* she still hid behind her walls. Kate had not conceived. She was not pregnant.

Though neither mentioned it, he knew she held him inside longer and longer. Anyone who listened and watched Kate was aware that she fulfilled her duty with a kind of passion and focus. It was damned infuriating in some respects. In the context of their marriage, he didn't want to think she was simply doing her duty.

But From the house, to the farms, everything she accomplished, was not just the way she measured herself, but her idea of equality. Her sense of self was wrapped up in seeing everything through to the end. He knew that from having to temper her expectations with her projects, having to remind her of the time involved, reminding her, that starting it and watching it progress *was* an accomplishment.

For all Kate saw herself as equal, the duty of wives was to provide heirs, even had it not been in the will, it was highest on the list of expectation for the titled. Damien knew that, and Kate knew it... Every servant in the house and every member of society, who was watching for their arrival in London, knew it.

He muttered a curse and reached out and grasped the sill, thinking of what Tom had told him this morning. The woman he had taken to the cottage the night before he



wed Kate, was rumored to be pregnant. He had been careful not to make bastards, but after that solicitor found him, informed him of his father's will, of his status, he'd drank himself into oblivion more than once, and had as well, the night before the wedding. He honestly did not know if the Inn Keep's daughter was telling the truth, *that it was his*, but he didn't assume she lied either.

Damien admitted that with the upcoming foray into society, the kind of scrutiny they'd be under, and though she never said so, Kate did not enjoy herself in town. He saw the test also, for what it was. It was going to be tense and strained for them both. And, with all that was unsaid between them, all the distance she kept with him, because of her discomfort with any weakness in herself... *and admitting to loving him would top that list-* one breath could shatter whatever they had built in these first months.

He hadn't held back during intimate moments with his wife. He never intended that either of them would share their bodies without pleasure. But he had held certain *things* from her, because Kate was so complicated a woman, and so different in the way she viewed things.

Unlike their peers, he didn't think that made Kate an oddity, but rather unique; not a person to make assumptions about. It would have been much easier had she been predictable from the start, possessing all the romantic ideals and notions about love, been vulnerable that way, instead of the complicated way that she protected herself from what she feared might hurt her in the end. But that was not Kate. And he liked her too...enjoyed her in too many ways, to take apart and examine.

He had a bit of time before their journey, and hoped the incident a few moments ago would work in his favor, and perhaps open the door for Kate to trust her heart, to trust him and deepen their intimacy. However, Damien felt himself treading a thin line where his marriage was concerned. If Kate did not get pregnant... If he'd planted a child in another woman the night before his wedding... a child that he could not deny...

## Chapter 5

Kate was relieved that Damien gave her that night to herself. He apparently worked late in the study, and she dragged herself off the bed, to take a long soak, and spend most of the evening by that window, sipping coffee and thinking deeply.

The next morning, they shared a normal breakfast, and then Kate did her work in the library. She dressed in a dun skirt and blouse, a hat to shade her face, and took a walk at luncheon, Damien joined her with some off comment about the sheep shearing, and as they strode along engaged in a normal conversation that centered on like subjects.

When they returned however, she stayed in the back courtyard while he smoked a cheroot, Kate brought up London, comparing their plans, speaking of the servants that would go ahead, explaining that the Duchess would already be there and likely inform them of which invites weren't to be missed.

Blowing a stream of smoke, Damien had been studying her, where she sat casually on a bench, the hat in her lap. "I'll send your mare up with Tom." He said, "The staff should have the house ready, and Jean Paul my wardrobe ordered, though he detests my penchant for casualness."

She nodded. "You have some acquaintances among the titled?"

"Yes. A few." He watched her close.

She commented stiffly, "I don't mean the women."

"Neither do I," he murmured. "Not all of society is an *Earl* or *Duke*. There are merchants and doctors and a dozen mere *Sirs*, whom I have some acquaintance with. I've attended races, belonged to Gyms and gambled with many, but though I wouldn't call them chums, some men condescend to share my company."

"I wasn't insulting you."

"I didn't think you were." He drew again and released the smoke.

Kate felt the rigidity in her spine no matter how mild he'd retorted. She watched a bee hover around the rose bushes near the house. "I'm not a very good dancer."

"Perhaps you've had bad partners. You don't move like a woman who cannot dance."

She bit her lip, hearing more than the casualness in that too. "I enjoy the opera, plays..."

"As do I, naturally."

She looked down at her hands, resting on the edges of the hat. "They will ask...you know. About an heir."

He was silent the longest moments, or so it seemed to Kate. And then she felt him behind the bench standing close.

"And we'll give them our enigmatic smile and shrug in answer to it."

Kate felt her throat tightening. She whispered, "Perhaps I should visit the physician, whist I am there...to...to..."

His hand landed on her shoulder, his fingers flexing a bit. "I found a treasure of jewels in the study safe. A pirate's booty Tom would say. I had the maid take them to your rooms. You should pack half dozen pieces to wear with your ball gowns."

Her hand came up and covered his firmly, her voice rough as she returned, "I shall do that. I have my mothers, but forgot to even pack them. I'll have several ball gowns done up...and something...stunning for the opera... I won't...be the dowd... this time...I'm the Viscountess...I w..."

"Kate." His voice sounded awful, as his hand turned to clasp hers tightly back.

And Kate was unaware of the tears rolling down her cheeks. "We shall be the most fashionable and handsome couple in town."

His other hand came to cup her head, to press it back against him with his palm covering her wet cheek.

Kate's eyes closed as the wet drops ran over his dark fingers. "We'll make them choke on their dire predictions of...us... both."

He came around as the sob shook her, gathering her in his arms, and holding her tightly as she wept against his shoulder.

Damien's hand was buried in her hair, the other on her hip. When she calmed to shudders, he forced her head back gently and began to kiss her, lush and soft and

achingly tender. Her own hands went to his hair and they kissed deep and slow, supple and soothing, kissing until they began kissing cheeks, brow, brushing noses, to catch their breath. When his mouth settled on hers again, it tasted of hungers and unspoken desires. Moments later he stood, and carried up the back stairs to his rooms.

Kate's turmoil came through in the following moments, her hands tore at the ties of his shirt, even as he unlaced her gown and discarded it, feverishly kissing him, desperate with want, with the chaos of her emotions. She was still in sheer chemise and stockings, he had only just gotten stripped, when she pushed him down onto the carpet and covered him. His sex sank deeply, fully, as she felt his hands flex on her breasts, but she moved on him with a need that was burning and begging to sear him to the bone.

"Kate...Christ..." He arched under her, his hands moving to her thighs.

She stared at him through a haze of lust and passion, of some primal need to ride them both into the deepest flames. She moved her lush hips up and down, around and forward fast, and sexual.

"Kate...let me touch you." He was trying to stroke the sensitive spot between her curls.

But Kate barely heard, she did not hear herself whisper, "I'm sorry..." She was lost, and at some point he knew it. For Damien rolled them and let her legs slide over his shoulders, he slanted down into her, thrusting and thrusting, driving until their feverish breathing reached the point of gasps. He came with a throbbing, a kind of

soothing that shuddered through his frame, but that Kate felt it too, and deep, deep inside.

They lay there side by side on the floor, the normal sounds of the house, mingling with a few filtering through the window.

Damien told himself to tell her about the Inn Keep's daughter, but he couldn't, after that. His eyes were closed; his own body feeling as if a storm ripped through it. Yet in his chest, there was a pressure, a heaviness that he'd never felt before in his life.

He didn't move as Kate arose. He heard her footfalls as she padded back to the bathing chambers. There was no way he could get through their London visit without knowing if they'd come home to local gossip and talk. And that would happen, he knew, because he'd grown up in the same circumstance himself.

He'd talk to Tom, have him bring the woman to the cottage where he could talk to her himself, considering he scarcely knew her. He had to try and get the truth, and then figure what to do about it, how to handle his responsibilities, how to live with himself if it were true. How to tell Kate...

\* \* \* \*

Damien was late for dinner. Kate had it alone. Before she went down to see if he was in the study. He wasn't. She walked out back, thinking he may have gone for ride. Normally, she did not seek him out, but felt she should, after that display of abandon she'd unleashed on him. She had a long talk with herself in that bath, realizing that he always talked to her, expressed himself

intimately, and perhaps she should just summon her courage and explain her own feelings to him too.

Kate didn't think he'd mock her. She rather thought he was revealing some of the same feelings to her too. Perhaps it was time she began acting more like the mature equal she claimed to be, and meeting him half way. She suspected, with some natural reservation, that he had been trying to convey to her that he was in love with her. If that were true, it made her admitting the same to him, much much easier.

It was still a notion, a word that she was not completely comfortable with. But there was no denying that in or out of bed, she felt a profound and deep reaction toward Damien. There were things he brought out in her that still amazed her. And he respected her mind, treated her like she had one. He looked at her, spoke, and moved her, in ways that made him so much of her world, her thoughts.

She hadn't realized what was happening until seeing those drawings...being caught up in the moments; she hadn't seen the transformation coming.

Kate gazed around the lawn and took the path to the stables. She didn't see him, so she turned and walked along the ridge of the hill, distracted a moment by the cottage, absently wondering if he'd taken her advice and made use of it-- at the same moment she saw his horse cropping nearby.

Having dressed in a bronze walking dress, cool and light of fabric, and her slippers, Kate took her time descending, coming up toward the side, when she noted the open window, and could see her husband back as he half sat on the sill.



She smiled, tempted to give him a scare, since he claimed she had no humor and no sense of play, teasing her about her serious streak. However she was a step away when she heard...

"It's your babe. I wouldn't lie about it. I had my menses before and there weren't any man in my bed for nigh on two months before we came here. You can ask my Da. I don't whore, but I like a man now and again. Only clean and handsome ones like yourself." A soft laugh followed. "You was foxed, but you know how to pleasure a woman, you do. That wife of yours is lucky, I had the feeling.. night before you wed, you was just getting started."

Kate felt dizzy. Nausea rolled over her. Her hands went to her stomach.

Damien murmured. "Thank you. But let us get to the problem at hand. I can set you up well, Mary, until the child comes..."

Kate turned and lifted her hem, running back up the hill. She passed Tom who was coming down. One look between them, at her pale and stark face, his wide eyes and gaping mouth, was enough. She ignored his call and ran all the way to the manor, taking the back stairs and going to her room.

Trembling, breathing sharp and short, Kate sat down on the window seat. Her head was shaking. The nausea rolling in her was mingled with an irrational rage, and some worse emotion. She ran her hands down her thighs, rocked back and fourth, and stared at the floor in a kind of mind numbing fog.

*It's your babe sir...It's your babe.... You know how to pleasure a woman...*

She moaned and leaned back, her arms going around her aching middle. She had to get hold of herself. She had to shut down the thoughts and images rushing through her mind. She was still gasping for air when the door flew wide and Damien stood there. From his hard breathing, his mussed hair, he must have rushed up the stairs.

"Get out." Kate managed.

He took a step inside.

"Get out of here, Damien. "

His face looked drawn. "How much..."

"I heard enough." She looked at the bed. "I'll leave for London early. It will give me time to finish my fittings." she glanced back at him. "You take care of your... business here... and come when you are ready."

"Kate..."

She shook her head roughly. "Not now, Damien. Right now... I can't stand the sight of you."

He muttered a curse, then, "I wasn't with her after we wed, Kate. Not with any woman."

She laughed harshly and arched her neck, looking up at the ceiling. "She's carrying your.... Your child." she couldn't say heir.

"Yes."

When Kate lowered her head to look at him, she could barely see for the pool of tears setting on their light brown surface. "There is nothing else to say. Leave me alone, Damien." Her teeth set. "Please."

He stared at her another moment before stepping back and closing the door after him. Kate found the book she'd reading and picked it up, hurling it at the door...before she fell apart again, sinking to the floor with her fingers digging into the cushion of the window seat, trying to anchor herself to something--so that the shattering wouldn't hurt so bad.

## Chapter 6

London had not changed, society had not changed.

Kate arrived whilst the house was still being set in order. She dealt with it well and busied herself following a visit with the Duchess, getting her fittings done and finding a maid who could do her hair in the best styles. She found one in Bridgett who had a ready smile, amazing energy, and one who needed little direction.

Taking her along whilst she shopped for necessities, had the finishing touches done on an ivory gown with pearls for the opera, the one with a deep neckline and train, a ball gown in rich jade and another in bronze and black; the shoes and wraps, the gloves and perfumes-- it was how Kate kept her mind off *how* it felt to be a fool.

She had lost something of herself when she wed Damien Chevalier, and left something more of it at Edrych when the coach pulled out. Now in London, she found a positive side to playing one's role, to the formality and the distraction of shopping and choosing an elaborate wardrobe. She found that sitting with the Duchess at tea, paying calls to leave her card. It was all written down somewhere in her make up, ingrained in young ladies when they were trained for their debut. And so, the motions were easy to go through, the smiles did not have to be genuine, or the conversations meaningful.

Kate spent more than she ever had on the fashionable gowns and accessories, relying on the best dressmakers and fashion plates. She began to wear her hair piled and threaded with ribbons, pearl and jewels, to have her gowns cut to display her assets, like most ladies of the

day, and to study the gossip rags, to chatter away about the latest scandals.

For some time she ignored the poor Duchess's arched brows and frowns at the change in her, for she did not so much as comment when the lady spoke of the sponsors for her projects, or anything of their mutual philanthropic investments.

Kate got through another day, another tea, another morning, as the hours were closer to Damien joining her. She had a list of respectable invites, formal suppers and several balls. There were rides in the park, to be seen, and nights at the opera. She used the time before he joined her, to completely change society's view of her. And if her laughter was fake, her chatter perfunctory, no one noticed, and no one cared, for they had, in their superficial way, declared that they'd always known the daughter of an Earl was one of them, that she had always been handsome and gay and amusing.

It was the second week of attending those hostesses, that Kate was riding in the Duchess's carriage and the woman put the question to her.

"There is no heir on the way, my dear?"

"No." Kate looked out the window. Then she added, "At least not by me."

After a quiet moment, the Duchess said, "You may as well confide in me, Kate. I have known you all of your life. For all that some call me a dragon, I hold you in the deepest affection." The older woman reached and took her hand. "I was not fooled yesterday, nor am I fooled by this butterfly act. I'm glad you have embraced your

womanhood, you look lovely in every gown and so on... But I know you as few do."

Kate looked at her. "I'll call on you tonight..."

The Duchess nodded. "Come for dinner. We can have a cozy and you'll feel much better."

But that night, after she poured it out to the Duchess, Kate did not feel better. She did not even feel better when she rationalized everything and put it in perspective for the Duchess.

"You are in love with him." The older woman said bluntly. "No one should expect a woman in love to be rational."

"But I can't give him an heir..."

To that the Duchess had merely waved her hand. But Kate could not explain how that had bothered her each month. She couldn't explain how she sometimes thought of carrying his child, and it had less to do with duty, and more to knowing she would be growing a babe from the passion they shared.

What was the use? She had become weak in every way, and had lied to herself, fought it, and still became so vulnerable to it that she was deeply hurt. She did not think now that Damien was so different from any man. He wouldn't have been faithful, she reminded herself. He would have tired of her eventually and the pain would have come anyway. He made love to every woman as if she were special. That was why, Kate reasoned, that he had a rep in the first place.

Yet the particular humiliation that another would bear him a child nine months from the marriage, and she would not. It was salt in an already growing wound. She had to get over him. She must. She had to rid herself of that vulnerability, so that she could back to thinking about life the way she had planned it before.

Yet under her daytime mask, Kate cried too much at night. She wasted hours fighting herself, her feelings for him, hate and love and jealousy, it was there with a dozen more emotions. She hated herself when she wanted him so badly she ached. And she hated him for being the way he was with her, showing her those intimate moments that were forever seared in her mind and body. *He was that way with her too... the woman, who carried his child.* He was that way... and she couldn't get the images out of her mind, wondering if he whispered those words in just that voice, or touched her the same...

\* \* \* \*

Damien arrived at the townhouse and went straight to the study. There he found a neatly written schedule for the week and a missive from the Duke. He answered the Duke and sent it off by servant, then went up the stairs to the master suit, this time not saying a word as Jean-Paul dressed him in formal black and white, including a sapphire stick pin in his intricate cravat.

He scarcely noticed that the valet did not try and put his long hair back in a queue. He was in the downstairs foyer, waiting, by the time Kate descended from her own chambers.

Damien saw first, those satin high-heeled slippers with minute bows, a few inches of stocking and froth netting,

silk, where she held up the skirts of her champagne gown. But when she actually came into view, his breath stuck somewhere in his chest. The gown had a deep v neckline, the shimmering champagne color complimenting her warm cream skin and bronze hair. At her elbows, where her matching gloves ended, was draped a length of velvet to cover her smooth bare shoulders in the night air. Her hair was up, intricately weaved with ribbon and pearls, and her lashes and brows were darkened slightly to enhance her light brown eyes. At her throat was a thin chain with one single pearl, drawing his eyes to the impressive inner swell of her breasts visible in that plunging V.

She had stopped at the landing. Damien saw when he met her gaze that her eyes had gone over him too. But she covered it with a polite smile. "Good evening, Damien."

"Kate." He bowed. He offered his arm. She took it, and they stepped out toward the carriage after the butler held the door. Once inside, Damien caught a whiff of her new perfume, some hot house flower, exotic and alluring.

His eyes fell to her hands where she fingered her fan while gazing out the window at the crush of traffic. "You look beautiful, Kate. Absolutely stunning."

"Thank you. You are quite handsome yourself."

Damien heard that automatic flatness, and ignored it. He played his formal role when they arrived at the assembly room, went through the receiving line with Kate, and stood with her at the edge of the ballroom.



But at first opportunity, he took her hand and murmured, "This is our dance, Kate." and led her out amid the colorful dancers, taking every opportunity to touch her.

He watched only her, looking into her gaze and murmuring, "You lied, my dear, you dance beautifully."

He saw something flash in her eyes before she merely nodded. Yet Damien could tell she was moving and dancing with him as they had when their bodies synchronized during lovemaking. She followed his lead, watched his body, and though she kept her expression clear, the brush of palms or arms, the merest breath of closeness, made her aware of him, as he was of her.

When the dance finished, he stood aside and watched Kate dance with others. He saw the stiffness; the mechanic steps that were nothing like those few moments with him. He handed her champagne when she returned to his side, and within the folds of her gown, stood close enough to capture her hand holding that fan, and clasp it for several long moments.

"I believe that is the Duke signaling you," She said stiffly. "You should go speak with him."

"I will see him in the morning at Whites." Damien moved his fingers to her wrist and leaned a bit to murmur, "I like the cut of your gown. "

"You would." She muttered and then flickered him a cool glance.

He captured her gaze again. "I have always said that you've no reason to hide your beautiful body."

“Particularly from a man who has seen dozens of them.”

“You knew my rep, Kate. I did not lie to you before you left either. ”

“Fine. You’re an honest rake. Now that you have been so blunt, allow me to return the favor. I do not believe you have ever said anything to me that you have not said to a dozen before. Nor do I think that you have done anything with me that is not part of your usual performance. So pardon me, if I am not flattered by your compliments. ”

She pulled her hand from his. “It was enlightening Damien, very educational, but I am sure you understand why we are both here, playing our roles. I suggest you be discreet with your bedmates this time, and let us both get through this duty with as little strain as necessary. ”

Damien watched her walk away and head toward the Duchess and a few dowagers seated by a long table. He muttered an explicit curse and then walked toward the Duke, who was indeed signaling him. He would talk to Kate at home.

As town life had its demands, talking to Kate was more difficult than Damien anticipated. Balls lasted until dawn, and by the time he arose and went to the club, then returned home, she was out doing her calls.

He saw Kate however, in the most fashionable and stunning gowns, saw her as they rode in the park or attended some formal supper. He watched her play the Viscountess to the hilt. Had he met Kate for the first time now, he would be fooled completely by her smiles and laughter, her social aplomb. But he saw a brittle

edge to her, noticed that she had lost weight, and saw her several times rubbing her temples when no one was looking.

He knew her every habit and expression, had watched it for months, and though each gown was more beautiful, the jewels sparkled on her skin, the hues and colors shimmering against it-- there was no spark in Kate's eyes, no passion in her laugh or voice. And Damien died a bit, each time he noticed. Though he played his own role, went through the motions demanded of him, there was no hour, no thought that did not center on Kate.

\* \* \* \*

It was during one of the most crowded and popular balls that Kate attended, wearing her jade gown and diamonds, having her hair in curls with a band of velvet nested amid them, that she watched Damien. She had covertly, for the last month, torturing herself with wondering whom among those women he danced with, he had slept with before, and who shared his bed more.

He was devastatingly handsome in formal clothing; his dark skin, tall form and that longish hair. Women looked at him, they followed him with their eyes. Kate could not blame them. She knew what he looked like with the layers peeled away, and she knew what his skin and warm breath on a woman's body felt like, what his eyes could do when they looked deep, what his voice sounded like, in the most private of times.

She had doubled her schedule since that first night. Kate made certain that she had little free hours, save to grab sleep and little food. The times they were in the carriage or coach, his scent, his eyes, on her, made the tension

of pretending to be gay, charming and unaffected, all the more difficult to carry out.

She wanted to know what he had done about the woman, and yet she did not want to know. She wanted him, and didn't want to want him. Because she discovered that loving did hurt, it made one weak, exposed, and she could not trust any of those things that he had said and done, to make her fall in love with him.

Kate, for all of her life, had been certain of what she wanted. Damien had changed that. It was horrible that one could not control wanting such a man, loving him, when she could not trust a single thing that had opened her to it.

The worst was, the irony was, that she now believed she at last may be pregnant. Cautious because of her emotional state, the pace in London, her loss of weight, it could all be a part of what delayed her menses. But given that she and Damien would not share the joy of it, given that he had a child coming any day with another woman, Kate could only weep in her private moments, and yes, rage in some part of her, that life was cruel to introduce one to love, only to deny them the fullness of it. *What did any of it matter now?* She'd fulfilled her duty... and how very hollow and empty that statement actually was. Far from being a matter of pride, it bloody meant nothing but grief at the moment.

Drawing in a trembling breath, she was mentally counting the hour, knowing they would leave soon. She was tired, fatigued; the headaches always came after every long night. Kate discreetly rubbed her temple, closing her eyes just a moment as the pound made nausea roll through her body.

She jumped at the touch of a hand on her arm, flickering her lashes up to see Damien before her, regarding her with concern.

"Are you all right, Kate?"

"Yes. Just tired."

"I've said our adieus'." He still watched her closely as he took her arm and led her through the crowd. Their capes were fetched, and once in the coach, he let the flaps up so that the near dawn air pervaded.

The rocking did not help, but Kate rested her elbow on the door, her forehead in her palm, breathing in the not pleasant but at least less stuffy air.

"You should sleep in, clear your schedule tomorrow."

"Perhaps I shall." She raised her head only to lean it back and close her eyes.

"You've kept up a grueling pace. Lost weight, too, and you look pale. There's no need to push yourself. We've only a week or so left, and everyone has complimented me on my striking and charming wife. Not one rumor remains from your debut."

Kate lifted her lashes, eyeing him under the veil. "I suppose I must return the compliment. You seem to have been discreet. The Duchess tells me that his grace has become a fast friend of yours, several other impressive names and titles too."

He regarded her quietly. "There is no woman in England I want more than my wife."

Her head lowered, she looked out. "Spare me."

"I know you have avoided me, Kate. But we must talk anyway, before we return to Edrych."

Her back stiffened. "I suppose the rumors have reached every village by now."

"No. They have not."

They pulled up at the townhouse. Instead of letting Kate step out, he went round and lifted her in his arms, carrying her through the door and telling the housekeeper. "Tell the maid to run her bath. Send some food and tea up as well."

"Damien. Put me down." Kate protested as he carried her up the stairs.

"Hush." He ignored her demand, carrying her to her suite, through the bathing chambers. As soon as the tub was full, he started undressing her, laying her jewels on the vanity.

"No. Don't." She tried to push his hands away.

He took off his coat and cravat, loosened his shirt, and went back to the latches on her gown. "Take a long soak, we will talk when you have finished."

Kate saw that he was not leaving until she was stripped. She kept her back to him until she stepped into the waiting water.

He gathered her clothing and jewels and then, thankfully left her in peace.

Sinking under the water to wet her hair, she stayed a moment before emerging. Lying back, she eyed the swirl of steam rising off her knees and thighs, dreading the confrontation, but tired, so very tired, of living with her thoughts. Kate sighed and began washing, and then lay another half-hour while the water cooled. *It was time, perhaps more than time, that they verbalized the truth and the realities of their marriage. God knew, she could not go on with the way things were.*

She entered her chambers, discarding the toweling on her hair, and then sliding on a rose silk robe as she dropped the other. Combing her hair, Kate tied it back still damp, and was seated on a bench, at the edge of the bed, when Damien entered. He too had bathed and was dressed much the way she'd grown used to seeing him, black trousers and white shirt.

He pushed the cart with its covered tray over, and placed it before her. "Eat something, Kate." He uncovered the dish with cheese and apples, grapes, before pouring her tea."

Kate ate. She did it because she had not been eating in the mornings, and having only tea at noon, a very rushed and light dinner. She watched him go to the low fire and stand there, with his hand on the mantle, obviously in some muse, as he did not speak again until the wheels of the cart squeaked, as Kate pushed it away.

He turned as Kate rose, seating herself in one of the chairs a few feet from him.

Damien said, "I cannot take back what I did before our marriage. I cannot deny a child I made either."

"I realize that." She nodded. "I gather you have provided for the mother?"

"Yes. She is living in a cottage with a cousin, who is a midwife. I had a discreet physician examine her, and Tom checks on her..."

Kate looked somewhere past his shoulder. "We shall have returned to Edrych by the time the child arrives. You should be there."

"I plan to be."

That hurt. As objective as she could be, as noble as it would have seemed from someone else, it hurt. "You will claim it, legally?"

"Yes. Kate."

She blew out a long careful breath and nodded again.

He came to stand so close that she could smell his scent, feel his heat, but Kate couldn't look at his face yet. He murmured, "Mary had booked passage for America. She has a wish to start a new life there. I've provided her an income. "

Now Kate knew, she knew it was coming, and she looked up at his face, hearing as if from a great distance, his next words.

"I've a nursemaid to be installed at Edrych, and a nursery set up in the lower apartments...."

She bit her lip, her eyes tearing and her nostrils quivering. "You want me to mother this child...."



He sat down on his haunches, taking her cold hands. "Kate. I cannot do as my father did. I won't be able to live with it. I know what I am asking..."

"You don't..."

"I do." His eyes were passionate, pleading. "You are strong and intelligent, a woman with courage and a sense of self. No lady amid the ton would care or consider raising their husband's bastards. But do you know what that word means, how it feels, Kate? I am aware of what I am asking of you, but I would not ask, if I didn't respect the kind of woman you are. "

"And how many more will you bring me?"

"None." He took her by the shoulders, making her meet his gaze. "I promise you. I swear to you, Kate. I never was careless, I don't know why that time... except that I was drunk, had been for days. It is no excuse, but it is done and I can't ignore it or do as my father. I know what I ask... But I will give you anything, anything, if you will take this babe and nurture it. I was bitter at my father, true, but for the love of my mother, for her strength and independence, for her heart, Kate, I would truly have been the bastard they claimed I was. "

Tears ran down her cheeks. Kate knew every word was true. That he had gotten all that passion and feeling from his mother. That he was who he was, because she loved him.

She looked away and nodded, swallowing a lump lodged in her throat. She did not expect it, when he gathered her to him. He kissed her temple and murmured, "Thank you, Kate. Thank you."

She hurt from his very touch, from that strong body holding her close. How often she had wanted to be gathered again in his arms, to be kissed and touched by him. But this moment was painful, for Kate realized her life would change again, she knew herself well enough to admit that she would not deny any child whatever she could provide. She acknowledged too, that because it was Damien's, she would love it, as he had shown her that she was all too susceptible to it.

When he leaned back, Kate said as calm as possible, "I shall speak with the Duchess and then we should leave. I believe the Duke can advise you, but we shall keep the birth as quiet as possible. When the proper time comes, we'll say it was born early and have it announced in the papers. Seven months perhaps..."

"Kate, you don..."

"No. Damien." She looked at him. "If we are going to raise this child, then we can spare it any stigma or questions. With the right solicitors and a few bribes, it is easily accomplished." She pushed until he stepped back, and heading for her bed she added. "I am exhausted. I should think the Duchess will see me tomorrow evening, before she goes to the theater." Kate turned down the covers.

Damien came by the bed, standing there as she slid in. "Perhaps, I should go down early, allow you time, to rest before the journey."

"No. Make the arrangements for Friday. "

He leaned over and touched her cheek. "...I am sorry. You have no idea how I regret... everything. I want you

happy, Kate. I did not intend for the marriage to be otherwise, once...we..."

She covered his hand a moment, but was looking across the room. "It will be what it is, Damien. As you say, I am a woman of sense and intellect. We have made decisions, and will get on with life, as we ought. "

He left her after a heavy, rather tense sigh. Kate closed her eyes slowly, feeling relief to be leaving London, at least in reality, with responsibilities; she would have to get on with life, wouldn't she.

## Chapter 7

They arrived at Edrych on a sloppy, wet, day. Kate noticed Tom pacing on the stoop, and shared only a glance with her husband as he let her down.

When she'd come forward on his arm, she saw the servant looking between them and paused with Damien, while the footman took their luggage in. As soon as the other servants were gone, she spoke, "What is it, Tom?" She met his gaze clearly. "The babe?"

He looked at Damien again; his face anxious, but Damien merely nodded.

Tom glanced back at her. "Born three nights past. A girl."

Kate slipped her arm from Damiens. "You must go, then." She glanced at him. "I'll ready the nursery."

The men left, Damien with a light touch on Kate's arm. But she went in and spoke to the servants, gathering them in the library, whilst she informed them that the child was coming. Since she presumed that gossip and talk was rife, that they knew the truth, she added, "The child is my own, and your masters, and that is the only talk I will tolerate about it, now or in the future. "

To the last of them, they bowed and curtsied. She thanked them, dismissed all but the housekeeper, whom she discovered in conversation was kin to the nursemaid. "Excellent." She stood and walked out with the woman. "My husband may be late, do hold dinner for

him. I believe I shall change and check everything in the nursery."

"Yes, Madam." The woman left her.

Kate headed up the stairs to strip her traveling dress and exchange it for a practical skirt and blouse, her half boots. She tied her hair back and went down to the apartments, viewing a pleasant room and sitting area for the nursemaid, and standing some time in the child's rooms, which were painted a warm blue.

Her hands ran over the cradle, obviously new, as was the rocker and other furnishings. Kate liked the fact that the space had large windows and a view of the gardens. It would be bright on a clear day, and cheerful.

She made a mental note to order books and to shop for toys... Later, in the library, she made lists, and sat back, thinking that Channing would easily be accommodating too, as her old rooms could be redone.

It was late, her dinner served on a tray in the sitting area when she heard Damien come in. He was speaking with Jean-Paul for some time before he had his bath. By the time Kate sipped her coffee he'd joined her, saying he had eaten before coming up.

"How is she?"

He looked up from taking a sip from his cup. "Very well. Anxious to start her fittings for a new wardrobe and to take that voyage."

"It must be...difficult, for her."

He nodded and set the cup down. "Not that she showed it. But I have told her that she may inquire about the child to us. She declined. As cold as it sounds, Kate, part of the arrangement had to be that I pay her an income only so long as she doesn't cause scandal or try something down the road that would be detrimental."

"Is she a nice woman?"

"Yes." He met her gaze. "Yes, she is."

Kate nodded and smiled briefly. "Well. Perhaps she will be mature enough, the babe, when she is grown, that the truth may be told her."

"Is that wise?"

Kate shrugged. "It's honest. And we'll respect her enough to be that way, when she's grown." He was merely looking at her, so Kate said, "What is the babe's name?"

"It's to be filled in on the birth record, which we haven't yet. " His gaze moved over her face. "I thought, perhaps... you should name her."

Kate swallowed.

"When she is brought here, and you see her, you'll know." He smiled then.

"Yes." Kate looked away from that smile and stood. "It's been a long day. I've left a list on your desk, some things we should order for the nursery. "She went to her doorway, feeling as if she had to put distance between them. "Goodnight Damien."

“Goodnight Kate.”

\* \* \* \*

The child was brought to Edrych, straight to Kate’s arms, as she stood just inside the nursery. She felt more than saw Damien lingering in the doorway after showing the wet nurse to her rooms. Kate pulled back the blanket and looked into the wide sapphire eyes of a dusky-skinned, raven-haired beauty, a delicately built child, but one that crawled into her heart, the moment it smiled and a dimple appeared.

“Bella...Arabella,” she whispered, finding the child’s hand and watching those tiny fingers wrap around her own with complete trust. She looked over then, at Damien, to see his eyes glistening, his throat working as he swallowed. Whatever he wanted to say would not come for he nodded but quickly turned away and left.

Kate sat in the rocker, holding the babe until the nurse came for the feeding.

Polly was a plump woman, round cheek’d and good-natured. Kate sat and talked with her, learning much about babies and children, as the woman had several grown and her last a year old.

“He’s weaned, and my sister has him for now. The master says I can use the carriage and see him whenever.”

“Bring him here, if you can manage.’ Kate shrugged.  
“And your husband?”

“He works here, Madam. He’s a groom.”

"Well. There is an empty cottage. You can use whilst here, to be with your husband and son."

"Thank you. It's a might crowded at George's uncles. We been living there nearly four years what with it being so close and all. But it would be nice to have something of our own. I'll sleep in here while she's nursing regular. If you want, we can put her to the bottle afterward. I always kept my milk a long time."

"Yes. I think that would be fine." Kate stood finally. "I'll be down daily, and tend her."

"Most ladies don't."

Kate smiled. "I'm not most ladies, Polly."

The woman grinned wryly. "No madam, you are kinder than most."

Figuring that she meant that because of her accepting the babe, Kate left-- and ran into Damien just outside the library.

They stood there a moment, distantly hearing Arabella's cry.

"Some reports came...from the builders."

She nodded looking around then back at him. He was still the most handsome, the most compelling man she'd ever seen, and that tension hanging between them had less to do with the babe being here at last, and more with the physical distance between two people who had been lovers.



"You're not eating enough, Kate," his tone sounded hushed in the hall.

She sighed. "I am pregnant."

His body seemed fall against the wall as if his legs gave out. The look in his eyes was both pain and joy.

Kate admitted, "I was not sure until I just spoke with Polly. I was ill, In London, but the stress, and everything that had happened..."

He sank down, sitting on his heels as he held his head in his hands. "My. God and I asked you t..."

"Bella is a lovely child. It will be no sacrifice to raise her."

He dropped his hands and straightened slowly, looking at her from under his lashes as he rested his head back against the wood panel. "I love her. How can one not love a babe?" His eyes were lustrous. "But I love you, Kate. I am undone that you will carry our child and give it life and nurture it. I love you."

Kate's own knees nearly gave out. She did lean a hand on the wall, catching her breath as her heart twisted. Looking down at the floor, she murmured roughly, "I don't believe you. I don't believe you love me."

"I know." He answered gruffly. "If you'd take me back to your bed, allow me to get close to you. I will prove it, Kate. You know, somewhere in your heart that I was in love with you, before the morning you found those drawings."

Kate moved her hand and looked up at him. "I don't trust you. It hurts to love someone, Damien. If you want me to be strong, to raise that child, this one," She put her hand to her stomach, "then help me find who I was before. Because I cannot be strong and love you."

"Kate." He took two steps, gathering her in his arms. "I am sorry. I will make this right and I will show you how wrong you are. You have enough passion to bring me to my knees, the courage and strength to do whatever you desire. In London you set the town on its heels. In those meetings, you sounded as brilliant as any man I've heard talk business." He cupped her face. "I made a mistake, before I wed you. I have asked much of you, and even what I didn't, you gave. I love you, Kate. I can wait for you to say it, but I cannot bear not kissing and touching and loving you, holding you in my arms. "

Kate's body trembled even as the tears poured. The words went straight through her heart. She knew they were true, she could feel it, see it in his eyes. She knew Damien loved her. But her throat was so constricted that she could get no words out.

When she put her arms around him, Damien groaned and then kissed her passionate and deep. He picked her up, and carried her to his chambers, lying on the bed with her in full clothing, whilst he leaned over to wipe the tears from her cheeks.

Kate began undoing her blouse when he leaned and kissed her again softly. In moments she was bare under his warm hands, stroked slow and loving, while he kissed her from head to toe. His clothing was discarded, but Kate discovered that he would not take her fully, until he had tasted every inch of her skin and brought her to a shattering climax.

When he covered her, joining their bodies, holding his sex deep inside her snug heat. Damien looked into her eyes whispering, "I have never felt this, never said this before. I love you, with my heart, body and soul. It doesn't matter what I was before, because I was not whole until I touched you, satisfied until I kissed you, felt my body moving with yours, and experienced pleasure inside of you. I have never longed nor wanted for anything, the way I have longed for you these weeks passed... they were years, yawning and empty, Kate. Because I could not reach out and touch you this way."

Kate slid her hands up his back feeling the strength in him. "You know...that I love you. You knew it before I did. "

"Yes. But say it, just once..." He began to move gently in and out, passionately sinking his sex deep and coming out slowly, making that erotic friction that he knew she enjoyed.

"Damien..." Kate whispered, arching her neck.

"Damien..."

He stopped suddenly...

Kate blinked, looking at him with some confusion, for he was smiling, rather puzzled, but smiling none the less.

"What is it?"

He laughed roughly and shook his head. "Say my name..." He moved in her again.

She touched his face, her lashes fluttering with pleasure. "Damien..."

He made a rough sound and rolled them to their sides, now cupping her face he husked, "You do love me. You have said it...every time you say my name like that."

Kate smiled and cocked her brow. "Well of course I have."

"God Kate." He laughed and looked up, then back down at her. "You are the most provoking woman."

She wet her lips, looking down where their bodies were joined. "Could I provoke you into getting on with what you were doing? I was rather enjoying it."

"Oh, yes." His smile faded and he rolled her to her back again. Holding her gaze while he whispered, "like this..." and moved slow..."or like this." and made a possessive thrust..."Or maybe, this..." He slid his hands down and held her legs wide to slant deep and firm."

"Yes...yes." She arched her neck, her nails biting into his forearms. "I love that."

He thrust a dozen times and reached down to tease between her curls. "Do you love this too."

She felt the climax overtake her, felt it melting her bones. "I love you, Damien. I love you."

He held her, finding his own release at the end of hers.

Lying quiet, moments later, he looked over to find her gazing at him with a bemused smile. Damien answered it, showing those deep grooves as he reached and clasped her hand.

Kate twined their fingers, looking into the face of the man she loved, the man who loved her. He was right. She did feel strong. Knowing that his heart was hers, she felt a confidence and peace that their lives and their children were going to be perfectly fine. This was a man who was willingly hers, one who had showed her his heart without shame. Love was something like drowning, but more like reaching the surface after years of living in the cloud of her fears and ignorance.

"Before you," she told him quietly. "I did not feel my body and my blood, my beating heart. I never noticed a breath...a touch... how soft the wind and sun feels. Before you, I didn't know how expressive eyes could be, or note the sound of a voice that is rich and deep. Before you, I didn't know pleasure that took me beyond my body, or want so badly that the pain felt like death. Before you, I did not even love myself, because I had to love you first, so that you could show me the beauty in it."

Damien's sapphire eyes were shiny and damp as he stared at her. He knew what she had written before. What she thought of poet's love once. And Kate's voice, her expression while speaking those words, was incredibly moving. It meant more than anything she could have said, and for all of his life, he would never forget them.

A single crystal tear poised on his lower lashes and he did not hide it, but kept their gazes locked. "I love you," was all that he could manage past his tense throat.

Kate smiled gently, reaching to brush those drops away and kiss him supple and warm. As his arms went round her, they kissed once more, sensual, hungry.

For the whole of that noon, there was no sound below stairs, save the hum of the wet nurse as she rocked the sleeping babe. The servants had their meal in the kitchens, hearing the crackle from the fire, an occasional scraping spoon while they exchanged looks and raised-brow grins, smug smiles between Tom and the fussy Valet.

And above, behind that closed door, there were sighs, breaths of pleasure, soft moans, whispers of skin against skin; it was the sound of lovers, making love, wonderfully giving their bodies, hearts and souls, taking their undeniable pleasure to new and stirring heights.

## **The End**

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## **Winter Heart**

Fate has not been kind to Jared Burke, Earl of Winterchase. Too many ghosts from his past life have made him into a man who is as remote as he is untouchable. People called him Beast and claim that his heart is as cold as his dark visage.

Clare Ross is a warm and giving woman; one who has grown strong from the weight of responsibility thrust upon her when her parents died and her younger brother, Aaron, the Viscount Hambelton went off the rails. Now that her brother has once again found his way, Clare is looking forward, with an open heart, to whatever joy life might bring her way.

What few people know is that it was Jared who took the young man out of the cold and gave him what he himself was denied - a second chance to live his life and take his future in hand. Only Clare knows that behind the grim façade, the Lord of Winterchase is much more

than he seems and what people claim him to be.

The reclusive Lord agrees to join Aaron and his party at Hambleton to celebrate Christmas and the young Viscount's twenty fifth birthday celebration. Here he meets Clare for the first time and finds her indeed to be the warm, caring woman that her brother spoke of with such affection. Determined to show her gratitude for what he has done, Clare befriends Jared, but what starts as innocent friendship instantly flames into a desire they never thought possible. Clare is sure, but is Jared willing to take this chance on love and let Clare be the one to melt his winter heart?

### **The Christmas Ball**

Shay O' Sullivan never expected to go to London and have a Season, as most debs do, but she had been determined to have her fairy tale. Slipping uninvited to a Christmas Ball, she found more than she bargained for when she fell headlong into the arms of seductive rakehell, Lord Derrington and lost her virtue and her belief in dreams as the morning dawned. Now, five years later, she is unintentionally swept up in a crowd headed for another Christmas celebration and another night of magic and who should be sitting across from her in the coach, but the dangerous rogue himself!

Thrown together once more by Fate the two lovers have never forgotten the secret that they shared. Far from erasing those memories, time has only served to fan the flames of passion and desire even hotter than before. But this time the dawn hour will find their hearts ensnared with a greater enchantment and a restored belief in the happy ever after magic of a Christmas Ball.

Gayle Eden also writes as Eve Asbury

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