

Julia Keaton



STRANGER IN MY BED

By

Julia Keaton

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Chapter One

Ransom had been in the house dozens of times since he had returned, so many times now that it had begun to seem as familiar to him as it had when he was a boy and had torn up and down its hallowed corridors and through its echoing chambers in pursuit of his brother, or being chased by his brother. For a moment he allowed his mind to conjure the ghosts of the past, allowed himself the luxury of reliving snatches of those halcyon days, but only for a moment. The memories were bitter sweet, because he could not summon them without also resurrecting the pain and he had taken to avoiding that because the grief begat anger and fury begat carelessness.

It would take stealth and cunning to take back what had been wrested from his family and he was ruthlessly determined to avenge his father and his family name and take back what he could reclaim that had been lost.

Perhaps, in time, if he succeeded, and the day came when he watched his own sons pelting through the ancient family manor, he could reclaim his memories, too, enjoy them as they were meant to be enjoyed without having them tainted by all the losses that had come after.

He paused in the secret passage as he heard the buzz of conversation within the dining room--women's voices. Having no interest in anything the occupants of the house might find worthy of discussion, he only paused a moment before continuing along the passage. Not much in the way of conversation, if it came to that. Dull wenches. Mostly all he heard was the irritating whine of the old woman complaining about the food. Wincing, he moved on quickly, and then more carefully when he heard the old woman demanding of one of the man servants if he had put out the poison like she had asked to get rid of the rodents before they gnawed the old house down and it fell about their ears.

He spied one of the culprits as he set his foot on the narrow stairs that led up to the second floor and studied it speculatively for a moment, an unholy gleam entering his eyes. Harry would have snatched the furry little demon up and left it for the old battle axe to find when she turned down her bedclothes.

The gleam died in the next moment.

Harry was gone, too, shot down in the prime of his life by a sniper's gun half way around the world, all for the glory of God, King, and Empire.

Banishing the ghost of his brother's grinning face from his mind irritably, Ransom climbed the stairs that were more ladder than stairs, placing each foot carefully after he heard a board creak ominously beneath his weight. He didn't hesitate when he reached the second floor. He went directly to the one room in the house he had not yet searched.

It had to be in this room. Had to be. There was no where else to look.

He discovered as he stood outside the panel that led into the room that he was still

reluctant to go in, even after all these years, even knowing that what he sought must be in there because he had searched the entire house and come up empty handed.

In spite of all he could do the memory of the last time he had been in the room crashed down on him, crushing him with the full weight of a six year old boy's terror and grief.

His mother had died in this room, struggling to deliver a child that had never drawn its first breath, screaming until she was hoarse. Mostly he remembered the relief and shame he had felt because he had been grateful that she could not scream anymore because no matter how far he ran or how carefully he covered his ears, he could still hear the pain, and then the fear and grief.

He remembered the sound even now.

And the blood. God he remembered the blood. The sheets had been soaked with it, the maids hurrying back and forth, carrying away the bloody linens and bringing more.

And he remembered his mother, almost as pale as the sheets as the life slowly seeped from her body, her beautiful hair tangled and wet with her labors. She had been cold already when she had summoned him to kiss him goodbye and tell him to be a good boy that she would be watching over him to make certain he grew up to be a fine man.

Scrubbing a shaking hand over his face, he eased the panel open and glanced around, confirming that the room was empty as he'd suspected it would be, that the Mansfields were both at dinner. Pushing the panel wide, he stepped into the room, wincing as the hinges creaked. He would have to remember to bring oil the next time he came--if he had to come again at all.

Straightening, he glanced around for the most likely place to search and made a discovery. The room looked nothing like he'd expected, nothing like he remembered. He was relieved, at first, when he saw that it looked nothing as it had the day his mother died, nothing like he remembered the last time he had steeled himself to go into the room before he had left to seek his fortune, for his father had had the room closed after his mother's death and had not allowed it to be touched.

In point of fact, he wondered for several moments if he had stepped into the wrong room by mistake but then he noticed the cherubs that supported the fireplace mantle, and the bay windows where his mother had often sat in those last months of her life, happily engaged in making clothing for the child she would take with her to her grave.

Unaccountably, fury surged through him as he looked around the room again, critically this time, and it occurred to him that they had callously desecrated his mother's memory, packed up her things and swept the life from the room as if she had never existed at all. His mother's rocking chair and sewing basket had vanished, the little tables once filled with knickknacks, the small portrait that his mother had had commissioned of her and him and Harry. Her carpets were gone.

The bed was not the same.

The one that stood there now had once rested in one of the guest chambers.

With an effort, he tamped the anger, quashed the memories of the little things that he remembered that had vanished, studying the room again more purposefully.

A woman lived in his mother's room, one of the two downstairs he was certain and not a companion or maidservant for they had neither. Pray god not the old battle ax or he might be tempted to come back and strangle the old harriidan in her sleep.

It did not help his feelings a great deal more to think it was the spinster, but after he'd examined it again, he decided it was undoubtedly her, for he saw none of the silly, frilly little things he would have expected to see if the room was occupied by the old woman. It did not smell of the aged--no laudanum or other quack remedies and tinctures in bottles beside the bed, no hot water bottles for aching joints, no ugly armor plated corsets lying about.

The sister then. The spinster. No doubt she was getting long in tooth by now. Perhaps it wasn't her room after all? She must be getting old enough by now to be desperately seeking beauty aids.

Not that they were likely to do her much good, whether she was pushing thirty or not. She had to be ugly as hell if even her brother's money had not snagged a husband for her.

Or maybe it was her temperament he couldn't sell?

Closing the secret passage door finally, he moved into the room and examined the contents of the dressing table. There wasn't much in the way of beauty supplies--some sort of cream that smelled like flowers and felt like fat when he rubbed it between his fingertips. Moisturizing cream to soften her age toughened hide? He put the jar down again and replaced the lid, looked around for something to wipe it on and finally just cleaned his fingers on the sleeve of his shirt.

Aside from that a brush and mirror set, cheap and worn with age, which he discovered still held a few stray reddish blond hairs, there was stationary, a pen and inkwell and nothing else. There was a small box on the dressing table, of the sort ladies liked to use to hold their trinkets and he opened it and examined the contents. Hair pins. He found a locket, as well, of the sort generally worn by, and given to, young girls. When he opened it, he found without much surprise, a small lock of dark hair.

Closing it again, he dangled the locket above the box for a moment, thinking of all of his mother's things that had been disposed of, and finally dropped it in.

He had not come for petty little revenges, but to recover his heritage.

When he had shut the box, he glanced around the room, wondering where she kept her real jewelry. Under her mattress?

He studied the bed speculatively but finally dismissed it.

Maybe she didn't wear jewelry, he thought derisively? Maybe she realized there was no point in hanging beautiful things from her neck and ears?

No perfume, no jewelry beyond the child's trinket.

After a moment, he moved toward a hand painted chest at the foot of the bed. Delicate roses scrolled across the lid. He pried it open, digging through its contents in search of the box he'd come for. He found nothing more than extra blankets and stoles.

He studied it over for several moments, lifted his head to make certain he could hear nothing to indicate the ladies of the house had finished their dinner, and moved to the armoire. He wasn't certain what he expected to find, wasn't certain of why he was even curious but he knew even as he reached for the first drawer pull that he was not merely searching for the box that had brought him.

Telling himself that he should know his enemies well, he yielded to the impulse to prowl.

Her brother, he knew. A low down scoundrel, that one, as low as they came, fleecing anyone slowwitted enough to mistake him for a gentleman and sit down at the card table with him, for he didn't doubt for a moment that his father was not the only one the bastard had cleaned out over the gaming table.

It didn't say much for his father that he had been one of the man's victims, but his father had been old, and grief stricken, and given to drinking heavily in the past few years according to his old butler. A gentleman would have refused to play him, not welcomed him in and cleaned his pockets.

Dismissing the thoughts, he checked the small drawers first and found naught more than reticules and undergarments--all very plain and sensible. No frills. Certainly nothing to indicate the woman realized she was a woman--unless she was a pious old prude.

Closing the drawers, he stood and opened the upper section where her outer clothing was hung. There was little beyond riding habits in the armoire, he discovered, and those had seen three or four seasons at the least from the look of them--carefully mended but still mended. There were a few day dresses, but those looked older than the habits. No ball gowns. Apparently, she was so hideous her brother kept her hidden in the country.

Mannish, he thought derisively. No perfumes, no trinkets, no sewing box that he had seen, and a closet full of riding habits.

A vision of his enemy rose in his mind's eye, dressed in the habits.

There was a disgusting thought. He supposed he was no judge of women's tastes, but the man looked like a troll as a man. Even trying to envision a female version revolted every sense.

He was on the point of closing the wardrobe again when the corner of a box caught his eye. He stared at it in disbelief for a moment. Slowly, he pushed the skirt aside that had concealed all but one corner and pulled the box out.

A mixture of fury and triumph began to filter through his shock as he stared at the strongbox in his hands, the chest that bore his family crest. There was no mistaking it. The casket had been a gift to some long forgotten grandfather, the first Marquis--a gift from his king that had held the description of the holdings that had been bestowed with the title. His father had prized it above everything else he owned. It had always held pride of place in the main salon.

And now it had been tucked away in the back of a 'lady's' wardrobe.

He would get it back, he thought furiously. The lands belonged in his family's name. The box, he knew, held his father's will and legal papers, the papers he had been searching for for months now. It would be the proof he needed to secure his father's estate once more.

He'd just discovered that it was locked when he heard the distinctive click of a woman's shoe on the hardwood floor beyond the room. It was sheer luck that it even penetrated for he had been vaguely aware of increased activity for some time, a commotion below that he had put down to arriving guests and the bump and thud of servants carrying trunks and bags upstairs.

The sound was so clearly brisk feminine footsteps, however, that his head came up as if it had been jerked upright by a puppeteer's string.

Tucking the box under his arm, he stared at the door, listening as the tap crossed the upper hallway, clearly coming closer, and then glanced toward the secret passage. The room loomed cavern-like as he gauged the distance between himself and the panel and calculated the likelihood of reaching it and disappearing before the woman was in the room.

Whirling even as the knob began to turn, he strode toward the opening and stepped through. He only just barely remembered the tell tale squeal of the hinges in time to prevent himself from giving his retreat away. Faintly breathless with the adrenaline pumping through his veins, he held perfectly still, hoping he would get the chance to seal the door before she noticed anything amiss. Furious with himself for his carelessness, for allowing himself to get so caught up in his curiosity about the spinster that he was liable to end up in jail, he mentally berated himself, peering through the slight opening to see if the woman had noticed the crack in the wall paneling.

A lot of good it was going to do him to have the damned casket now! The woman would be screaming down the house if she discovered him, certain he was after her maidenly virtue.

The thought had no sooner entered his mind than he felt the irresistible urge to see just how close he had come to pegging the woman.

Knowing he was probably going to live to regret it, he peered through the slit as he heard her cross the room.

The jolt that went through him when she stepped into view paralyzed him for several moments, suspended even his breath as if someone had punched him in his solar plexus.

* * * *

Melantha Mansfield uttered an unladylike growl of impotent fury as she closed the door behind her. "Rupert, you low down snake!" she muttered under her breath. Stalking across the room, she flounced down on the bench before her dressing table and began to snatch the pins from her hair. "Rusticate, he says! Hunting! Hpmh! A likely tale, that one! Months on end we do not hear a word and then he just sails merrily in with as rowdy a bunch of ne'r do wells as I have seen him with yet and suggests Grandmother and I take a trip to the seashore while he and his friends do a bit of hunting!

"With what, I would like to know?

"And what would they be hunting at this time of the year, I would like to know!

"Not but what Grandmother and I should not have any trouble at all finding a place at Brighton just now since no one goes there at this time of the year! But how we're to pay for it is beyond me since we've hardly a farthing between us!

"If they are hunting anything beyond tarts to warm their beds I would be amazed. Grandmother simpering over him as if he's the second coming, and she without a notion of what he's about. Well I know and it can not have been so long ago that she can not remember."

Having disposed of the hair pins, she grabbed the brush and raked it through her hair in angry, jerky movements and tossed the brush back onto the dressing table.

Dragging her long hair over one shoulder, she reached behind her to struggle with the lacings of her gown. "As God is my witness," she grunted as she wrestled with the lacings at the awkward angle, "I will throttle that man if he looks sideways at Nancy! I can not do everything in this house by myself. I will not leave her here with that rowdy bunch, I do not care what Grandmother has to say on the matter! Or Rupert either!

"If Grandmother and I must go, then she will go, too, and we will see how well he manages this blasted household without a maid of any sort!"

Having finally managed to loosen the gown somewhat, she got up from the bench, fought her way out of it and threw it across the room. Reaching behind her, she began to pick at the lacing of her corset, pacing now because she was simply too agitated to be still. "Mark my words, he will be after Grandmother first thing to hand over what little household money we have left, for he would not be here if he were not run off his legs again. And she will hand it over and apologize like a mealy mouthed simpleton when he demands to know why there is so little.

"As if we subsist on air when ever he is not about!"

Removing the corset at last, she pitched it toward the window, wishing she had

something heavier to throw. Massaging her ribs briefly in relief as the pressure was removed from them, she dropped her hands to her waist and untied her underskirts next, let them fall to the floor and then kicked them to one side.

“I will not go! And I shall tell him that when ever he deigns to rise tomorrow. I am not a child any more. He can not make me!”

She looked down at herself, discovered she was still wearing her stockings and slippers and flounced onto the bench again to remove them. “I will think of something,” she muttered darkly, staring at her bare toes and wiggling them once she had removed the hose and shoes. “He has a hunting box. Why did he not take them there if they were so keen to be all manly and hunt and kill for sport?

“He has lost it,” she answered herself. “Or he has come here for another reason altogether. What though?” she asked meditatively, rubbing her temples. Nothing immediately came to mind and after a few moments she got up and pulled her chemise off.

* * * *

Dizziness reminded him to breathe and, as if dragging in a gulp of air was sufficient to activate his brain, it commenced to sputtering an assortment of disjointed impressions and information. The instinctive side of his nature was working far better than the cognitive side, however, and as the woman on the other side of the curtain began to strip her clothing off layer by layer, it became increasingly more difficult for the thinking side of his brain to catch up since all of the blood in his body seemed to be pumping away from his brain and into his cock.

There was nothing vaguely mannish or aged about the woman striding boldly about the room teasing him with the bare flesh she revealed inch by excruciating inch until he was in a fever of impatience for her to reveal all. She stopped just shy of removing her chemise and he ground his teeth in frustration, for he could see just a hint of the pink tips of the heaving, bouncing, enticingly rounded globes of her breasts through the thin fabric.

Obligingly, she moved after a moment to the bench again and sat to show him more of what he thirsted for. Hiking her skirts up, she removed her shoes, untied her garters and rolled her hose down her legs, revealing a pair of shapely legs that sent another painful burst of blood into his groin.

He almost lost it completely, however, when he had scanned her legs from foot to crotch. For she sat with her legs splayed slightly apart, fanning them slightly and flexing her feet and toes. And each time she opened her legs he caught a glimpse of the gaping slit in the crotch of her pantelettes, a peek of pink flesh and dark blond curls that set a pulse to pounding in his temple hard enough he thought for a moment that he might black out.

As frustrated as he was that he could catch no more than a tantalizing glimpse to probe the mysteries of her womanhood, however, his cup runneth over when she got to her feet abruptly and stripped off the last barrier between his gaze and the entire upper portion of her body, standing before him in all her glory in nothing but a sheer pair of pantelettes.

* * * *

As Melantha dropped her chemise to the floor she discovered she had tossed her clothing in every direction as she had undressed. Shrugging dismissively after a moment, she moved to the armoire and took out a night dress, slipping it over her head and buttoning it as she turned toward her bed. She froze abruptly as something out of place penetrated her anger. Pivoting on her heels, she stared in disbelief at the open armoire, or more specifically the bare spot at the bottom near the back.

* * * *

He wasn't at all certain that his instincts would have saved him if not for the fact that the woman took that opportune moment to 'bring the curtain down' over the display that was causing him so much pleasurable discomfort. His instinct for danger did kick in, but sluggishly as she pivoted on her heel and stared hard at the armoire. He rather thought it was the expressions that rapidly crossed her lovely features that finally penetrated the heated red fog that had been suffocating his brain in favor of another portion of his anatomy, though, for she turned first deathly pale, and then bright red before her face contorted in a ferocious scowl.

Perhaps it was at least in part the hard edges of the casket he became keenly aware of digging into his ribs at just that moment. Whatever the prod, his decimated brain leapt from the cabinet to the box beneath his arm and the threat of discovery just as she whirled and stalked toward the door to the hallway.

She stumbled over the shoes and clothing that littered the floor on the way. "Damn and blast it!" she growled furiously, giving them another kick and marching purposefully toward the door.

The instant she snatched the door open, stuck her head out, and bellowed a woman's name, he closed and latched the panel, gritting his teeth as the hinges let out the squawk he had feared it would, and then peered into the room through the peep hole.

She had heard it. She was no longer looking down the corridor. She was staring around the room, her blue eyes as wide as saucers.

Chapter Two

Goosebumps erupted all over Melantha's body, but focused most uncomfortably along her spine and the back of her neck, making the fine hair there rise. She shivered, unable to command herself to move in any direction as she scanned the room again, searching it for any sign that someone besides herself had been in the room. She saw nothing, but neither could she shake the almost palpable sense of being watched.

“What is it, Miss Melantha?” Nancy asked uneasily behind her, startling Melantha out of her trance-like state.

Jumping, Melantha whirled to look at the maid blankly.

“Mercy!” Nancy exclaimed. “Ye look like ye’ve seen the ghost! Was he here then? Is that what had ye screechin’ down the hall fit ta wake the dead?”

Irritation brought Melantha back to earth. It was not bad enough they could scarcely afford servants, now they had begun to mutter about ghosts. Before long she and Grandmother would have the great hulking place to themselves. “I was not screeching!” she said testily. “You know very well the bell pulls have not worked in months. And there is no ghost! Grandmother and I have been here nigh on three years. Don’t you think we would have seen, or at least have heard, a ghost if there was one?”

“But cook swears she saw him in the kitchen, drifted right into the wall, he did!”

“Nonsense!” Melantha said bracingly. “We have mice in the walls, and that is all.”

“Mighty big mice,” Nancy muttered. “’Bout the size of a cat, at the very least.”

Ignoring that, Melantha moved away from the maid, striding quickly toward the window and jerking the drapes back. She didn’t know whether to be relieved or disappointed when she saw that no one was there.

She was relieved, of course, but she did not feel one whit better. When she had checked the window latches she turned and almost collided with Nancy. “Have you been in my room today? Perhaps to put the laundry away?”

Nancy frowned, following Melantha as she moved from the window to the bed and got down on her hands and knees, peering under the bed. “Laundry day ain’t till tomorrow,” Nancy responded absently, bending down to peer under the bed with her mistress. “A bit of dust there,” she commented self-consciously.

Melantha lifted her head and stared at the woman, who was almost nose to nose with her. “Did you happen to notice Grandmother in my room?”

Nancy frowned. “Why would yer Grandmother be in yer room?”

Melantha frowned, her lips flattening. “Snooping!” she said succinctly.

“Oh. Not lately. That’s not to say she hasn’t been, but not that I caught her at.”

Melantha sat back on her heels, studying the room for any other place of concealment, but aside from the armoire itself, there was nothing large enough to conceal anyone of any size and she had taken her night dress from the cabinet. Surely she would have noticed?

She got up after a moment and went to search it anyway, knowing she would not get a wink of sleep if there was any doubt at all in her mind that she was alone in her room. Again, Nancy followed her, peering over Melantha’s shoulder as she jerked the clothes

aside and examined the back of the tall chest. “What are ye lookin’ for, if ye don’t mind me askin’?”

Melantha frowned. “That beautiful little chest we found in the attic a while back. Have you seen it?”

The maid stared at her blankly a moment and then peered into the armoire. “It was there in the back the last I seen it.”

Melantha eyed her suspiciously. “You did not accidentally knock it out and break it?”

Nancy shook her head.

“I won’t be angry,” Melantha said coaxingly.

Nancy’s face crumpled in dismay. “But I ain’t touched it, Miss! I swear it on my sainted mother’s grave!”

After studying the young woman for several moments, Melantha decided the girl was telling the truth. Another thought occurred to her on the heels of that, however.

“Rupert!” she growled, abruptly furious as it occurred to her that he had probably come to collect more to sell. They would not have beds to sleep in if ‘lady luck’ continued to frown upon him. “Has he been in here?”

Nancy gaped at her. “But ... he ain’t so much as poked his nose up stairs yet, Miss. He and his guests are downstairs in his study.”

Melantha rubbed her temples as she became aware of a pounding headache. “Has Grandmother gone to bed?” she finally asked, almost idly.

Nancy blinked. “I’d just tucked her in when I heard ye bellow--callin’ me,” she stammered. “If there’s nothin’ else, Miss, I should get back to her and give her a dose of laudanum, else she ain’t gonna sleep a wink tonight with all the racket his lordship and his friends are makin’ ---Beggin’ pardon. Not that they’re makin’ a huge ruckus, but she’s not accustomed to havin’ anybody else in the house.”

Melantha waved that away. “Go. Be sure to give her just enough to help her sleep. And then, if you will, ask around, discretely, to see if anyone perhaps came into my room by mistake, or if someone came in to clean and damaged the box and took it to be repaired.”

When Nancy had left, Melantha stood in the center of her room for several moments and finally went to the dressing table to collect the candle she had brought upstairs with her. It flickered as she moved around the room, searching. She knew she had not moved the casket herself, but she could not let go of the hope that she had, and had simply forgotten it. Or that someone had been in cleaning and accidentally knocked it from the armoire and pushed it under a piece of furniture.

It seemed an unlikely scenario, but her mind was desperately seeking anything other than the possibility that someone had simply come in and taken it.

Moving to the dressing table again after a while, she plopped down on the bench and set the candle stick down, thinking.

They had been at dinner when Rupert and his guests had arrived. She had heard the servants carry their baggage up the stairs. In all the commotion it was not beyond the realms of possibility that Rupert, or even one of his guests, had come upstairs and looked around.

Rupert's cronies were of questionable character to say the very least, but she still found it difficult to accept that one of them had taken the opportunity the distraction of their arrival had caused to slip upstairs and search for anything of value to steal.

Not that they could find much when Rupert had already culled the most valuable furnishings long since and sold them off.

Still, it was one possible explanation for the missing box.

One more possible nail in her coffin.

Lifting her head, she stared at the reflection that stared back at her from the large mirror above her dressing table. Her eyes were wide, haggard, reflecting the fear that hovered just below the surface of the calm she was trying so hard to preserve.

Was Rupert or whoever had taken it sly enough to find the false bottom? It was cleverly hidden, but not nearly enough for her peace of mind at the moment--only a marginal hiding spot after all. She'd always been worried her grandmother would come into her room to snoop, which was why she had hidden the chest to begin with.

She must have been careless. She must not have pushed it far enough back.

Her belly clenched. They would find her journal. She held out absolutely no hope that the thief would overlook it.

She felt sick to her stomach.

She'd never had the key to open it, which was how she'd discovered the false bottom--by pure accident after hours of trying to pick the lock. She'd been mildly amazed that she had discovered the box in the house at all when it was obviously valuable. She'd given up on trying to pick the lock after she'd found the false bottom, certain that it was empty and hardly worth the effort.

The papers in the secret cache had been another matter. Yellowed with age, the writing almost impossible decipher even if she had had an understanding of legal ramblings, she had still been certain that they were valuable and had moved them to another hiding place for safe keeping. Now she wondered why she had ever thought the box an excellent place to hide her journal.

Had whoever had taken it expected to find jewels inside? Once they saw it held nothing of value, would they simply toss it, or sell it?

She thought it likely, in which case, there would be no telling where her journal would end up.

Dropping her elbows to the dressing table, she covered her face. She had written everything down in that book. Everything. Every sordid fantasy she had ever imagined. She brought her hand to her mouth and bit the edge of her forefinger and palm to contain a groan of horror as a new thought surfaced. Her name was in it!

Merciful god! What had possessed her to sign the blasted thing?

Of course she had not intended to use it as anything but a journal to begin with. She had not expected that she would ever write anything that might ruin her!

She would be ruined, ostracized from society! She would never get the chance now of that often promised but never delivered London season. They would bandy her name about like a whore's. There would be no husband, no life outside of what her grandmother and brother could provide, and she would be punished endlessly for her folly.

She would go insane if that happened.

She could not bear to live like this for the remainder of her life, to know that all hope of anything else was gone! The hope that things would change one day for the better was the only thing that kept her going.

Her nose and eyes burned at the thought. Her throat clogged with unshed tears of self loathing. The journal had been her one weakness, her one hope, the one area where she had allowed herself to slip the chains of propriety and indulged free expression of her heart's desires.

And she should never have done so!

She couldn't think that way or she would go mad, she thought, abruptly struggling to curb the temptation to yield to hysterics.

Nothing else had been taken, she reminded herself, and someone bent on thievery would have turned the room upside down searching for anything of value. They would probably have taken her hair pins and her comb and brush--things of little value, to be sure, but things that could be sold.

Grandmother or Rupert had been snooping. It was possible it had happened earlier in the day, or perhaps before dinner ... or during if it had been her brother.

There was no reason to suspect a thief had stolen into the house. What bravado he would have, to sneak into an occupied house! And then, after such daring, to take only one small chest? It was absurd! She was frightening herself with nothing, blowing the entire thing all out of proportion.

* * * *

That could not have been Mansfield's sister, the spinster, Ransom told himself absently as he made good his escape. She must be a visitor. He had to have been mistaken about it belonging to one of the women of the house. But then, he'd found the box. The room had looked lived in, not like a guest room.

It must have been the spinster, for it sure as hell wasn't the grandmother!

She was a beauty, not merely passably pretty, not unremarkable, beautiful in an entirely wholesome way that was neither classic nor flamboyant. She had borne no resemblance to her brother whatsoever that he could tell, although, in truth, his memory of her face had been upstaged by his memory of her body.

He was convinced though, that before he had seen everything else, he had been stunned speechless by her lovely countenance.

The moment she had begun to strip, he had forgotten everything: to breathe ... to leave ... the purloined box beneath his arm.

She looked nothing like he'd expected. She was tall for a woman, but not gangly of limb, and certainly not hulking. Far from looking mannish, she seemed more an Amazon, a warrior woman, no doubt because of her penchant for riding. Her arms were toned instead of softy and doughy. He wondered if her thighs were, as well. He thought, hazily, that they had looked to be but then by that time he had been wholly focused on the opening in the crouch of her pantalets and the enticing glimpses he caught of her woman's mound.

The memory sent blood rushing into his groin, making his cock tighten uncomfortably in his breeches.

She had drawn his gaze unerringly to her narrow waist when she had removed the corset and massaged her ribs, smoothing the thin chemise so that he could see the way her waist flared into deliciously curved, proportionate hips. He had been able to make out the delightful shake of her rump as she walked just well enough to turn his mind to mush, and he wondered how it would feel in his palms. Firm? A perfect fit?

The chemise, whether by design or from a great many launderings, had been the next thing to transparent and still too damned concealing as far as he was concerned. He could see through her chemise but not nearly as well as he'd like. Her breasts had strained at the thin, fragile cloth at her agitated movements. Her nipples had been hard, tipped upward as if awaiting the suckle of a man's mouth.

The memory made his mouth water.

* * * *

A tap on the door pierced Melantha's distraction. "Come in."

It was Nancy, and Melantha felt hope surge through her.

"No one admits to comin' into yer room or sendin' tha box out for repairs. Several of tha

guests brought their own valets and Mr. Shaw spoke with them. He said tha guests just went to their rooms to change out of their travel clothes and then joined Lord Borden downstairs. Sorry, Miss. Was there anythin' else ye wanted?"

"No, thank you," she said, dismissing Nancy.

"Good night, Miss Mansfield."

Melantha worried a knuckle with her teeth. It had to be someone in the house that had taken it, for whatever reason. Rupert and his friends were downstairs, likely their valets had either gone to bed or had congregated in the nether regions of the house to await their summons.

Grandmother would be asleep now. She was tempted to try to slip into the room, since Nancy had dosed her with laudanum, but it hardly seemed worth the risk of being discovered when she could search more easily during the day. It was a different matter with the others. She had no idea how long they meant to stay. Some of them might leave right away and then she would never know who had the twice damned box!

She had to find it--the sooner, the better.

Getting up from the bench, she grabbed her dressing gown from the armoire and slipped it on, tightening the belt as she moved to the door and eased it open, looking out into the hall and listening for sounds of movement. Downstairs she could hear a burst of guffaws every now and again, but otherwise, the house was quiet.

She sighed in relief and crept out, going quickly to her brother's room since she thought him the most likely culprit. The door was unlocked, thankfully, but whether that was a good sign or not, she couldn't tell. It was just like him to assume she'd take his thievery without question, she thought indignantly.

Damn his hide for putting her into this position!

Her heart lodged like a fist in her throat, she slipped inside and searched his room from top to bottom, frantically looking through his chests, beneath the bed, inside the closet. There were only so many places it could fit, and they all turned up empty.

Despondent, she left his room and trudged back to her own room and collapsed in bed, too deflated and emotionally exhausted to even consider facing another harrowing search.

The worst of it was, she thought dismally, that the book was not really a diary in the truest sense of the word. She had spent far more time pouring out her secret fantasies than she had recording her boring existence.

* * * *

Triumph pervaded Ransom's senses as he entered his room and set the ornate casket atop the desk to study it and enjoy his victory. For the first time in months, he smiled.

Settling on the bed, he pried his boots from his feet and dropped them to the floor, then stood and shrugged out of his jacket and waistcoat. After looking around a little vaguely, he tossed them onto his trunk and untied his cravat, leaving it hanging around his neck as he poured himself a brandy. The cuff links came off next and when he had dropped them onto the desk he opened the front of his shirt, tugging the shirt tails from his breeches before he finally settled in the chair before the desk, leaning back and propping his long legs on the desk top. The faint smile still hovering about his finally etched lips, he studied the box for several moments more, tamping the urge to yield to temptation and rush when he wanted to savor the moment he had been waiting for for months.

Almost immediately, the image of the woman flashed in his mind's eye: her angry stride, jiggling breasts, fiery eyes and thick, wavy hair. His cock hardened just thinking about her.

He looked down at the uncomfortable bulge in his breeches and adjusted it to ease the sense of strangulation, putting the distraction down to his excitement over finally succeeding in his plans ... though she was an attractive woman.

And it had been a hell of a show.

He took a swallow of brandy, savoring the mellow liquid fire as it warmed his belly and soothed his tension.

When he had downed about half the glass and begun to feel more thoroughly relaxed, he reached into his open shirt and pulled a chain from round his neck. Drawing it over his head, he pinched the key between his fingers and unlocked the chest.

He stared at the interior of the box blankly for an endless moment. Straightening abruptly in the chair, he dragged his feet from the desk and leaned forward, upending the box and shaking it in shocked disbelief. His father's papers were not inside.

The box was locked and only he had the key.

Peering at it, he could see scratches where someone had been attempting to pick, or had succeeded in picking, the lock. Tamping the rage that began in the pit of his stomach and threatened to overflow, he struggled with his disappointment, trying to think.

He knew his father had left the damned papers in the box, though. He had said as much in the last letter.

After a prolonged moment of thought, he righted the casket in his hands, feeling around the edges for the secret latch. Finding it, he opened the bottom. A book dropped onto the desk, stuffed with papers and tied closed with a pink ribbon.

He shook the chest, feeling inside for anything that might have clung to the inside, or slipped into a crack--fighting the infuriating truth that was staring him in the face.

The papers were gone. The box contained nothing! Nothing but a damned book and some silly woman's things.

Dropping the chest abruptly, Ransom pushed it away from him before his fury made him do something stupid--like smash it to bits.

Pushing himself to his feet abruptly, he paced the room, trying to think of where he'd gone wrong. He hadn't though. His father's letter had been cryptic, to be sure, but he knew he had not misread it. The papers had been in the box. Someone--the woman--had emptied his father's box and disposed of his papers. He had to find them, but he could think of no way to do that now. The chest was his best lead. He could spend a lifetime searching Remington Manor and still not find what he required.

If the papers even existed still.

Rupert sure as hell didn't have them or he would have sold the estate off to pay his gambling debts by now.

Growing tenser instead of calm, he dropped to his chair after a while and finished his drink in one swallow, then poured another. The second drink had little more effect than the first, simply because he was too focused on his problem to relax enough to think. Irritated, he untied the ribbon around the book and picked it up, flipping through idly as he puzzled out what he would do now.

A word jumped out at him from the page--nipple.

Sitting up abruptly, he caught the edges of the book with his thumbs and opened it wide, reading the passage.

He binds my wrists and feet, gently, tenderly kissing my skin all over. My quim aches with need, and I want him inside me. He teases me relentlessly, taking first one and then another nipple into his mouth. His soft fingers caress me all over. I cry out and beg for release....

Ransom's cock hardened unbearably, making his balls tighten and draw up. A fine sheen of sweat dampened his brow. Stunned, wondering if the brandy he had just knocked back had gone to his head, he flipped through the book, caught another erotic passage and then another, each more erotic than the last. Dumbfounded but thoroughly aroused, he turned to the first page to see whom it belonged to and saw one name alone--Melantha.

Mansfield's spinster sister?

Or so he'd thought. So, apparently, everyone thought, but if she was a spinster, she most definitely was no lady, and no shrinking virgin.

More and more, the woman surprised him.

Frowning, he stared at the book in his hand for several moments, wrestling with himself, but he discovered he could no more resist the urge to read the book than he had been able to resist the urge to watch her as she undressed.

Flipping to the beginning, he started reading and kept reading until the candles burned

low and forced him to light new wicks--read until he'd finished the last page, dated the previous night. The loose pages were from a spur of the moment affair, when she did not have access to the journal.

Ransom closed the book and dropped it onto the desk. Absently, he rubbed his groin in an attempt to ease his discomfort, to no avail.

Sighing in frustration after he'd sat studying over it until his body had begun to cramp from inactivity, he tugged on one end of his loose cravat, sliding it from around his neck before shrugging out of his shirt. At first, he'd thought the book merely a diary, a record of an affair with her lover. He'd soon come to realize, however, that her writings were much more than that ... It was secret, sexual fantasies and moreover, he now suspected they were the sexual fantasies of an untried girl, not a woman of experience as he had first thought.

Stretching, he replaced the papers and book in the chest, locked it, then stood and moved the casket to a hidden compartment within his portmanteau. When he had locked the compartment and the portmanteau, he removed his breeches and stockings, snuffed the candles, and crawled into bed.

Tomorrow he would continue his search, he promised himself as he stretched out on the bed trying to relieve his cramped muscles. He fully intended to find the documents, no matter how long it took.

One muscle in particular resisted his efforts to relax and after a few moments, he rolled onto his side, easing the weight of the blankets from his stiff cock. Absently, he rubbed it, working the kink from his muscle. Images rose in his mind, of taut thighs gripping his hips and generous buttocks filling his hands. He groaned, squeezing his eyes closed as he tightened his hand on his shaft, stroking himself harder.

She would be fire, more likely to burn him alive than quench his desires, he thought, remembering the temper that had brought her into the room, that had driven her as she had paced back and forth discarding her clothing one item at the time.

Would she be as tight as he imagined, he wondered? Would he be sweating blood as he forced his way past impossibly tight muscles that clung to his girth and length like a fist?

His breath came in short pants. He felt his balls tighten with impending orgasm. His cock pulsed in his palm, engorged with blood from his rapidly beating heart.

Giving in to the fantasy, he conjured her full lips in his mind's eye, imagined her swallowing his member, greedily sucking him, imagined her hands clenching his buttocks, kneading his balls, stroking his thighs.

His cock jerked suddenly, spurting a small amount of semen onto the sheets. He arched his head back, stroking himself until the spasms of release ceased to come.

Gasping for breath, he relaxed limply on his back, glorying in the surcease of the tension that had gripped him from the moment he had set eyes on her, on the relief from the dull

ache that had been tormenting him for hours.

Dissatisfaction set in as his heart slowed and his breathing returned to normal, however. In truth, the orgasm brought nothing more than a temporary relief. Pleasuring himself could not compare to the delights found in a woman's body.

Rolling to the other side of the bed, he thought about the diary, and drifted into erotic dreams.

Chapter Three

Despite the fact that she had rested indifferently, Melantha's eyes popped open at the usual time the following morning. Regardless, her mind was slow to catch up and she lay staring groggily at the morning light filtering into the room for a while, trying to figure out why she felt so worn out. Was it early morning? Early evening?

Thoroughly disoriented, she struggled for a while to figure out if she'd lain down for a nap and slept until dusk, or the following morning.

Bits and pieces of her dreams from the night before flickered in her mind like fireflies, blinking on then disappearing. Finally, one in particular formed substance.

She groaned, pulling the covers over her head. No wonder she was so tired! She had spent the entire night searching for that twice damned chest! It might only have been dreams, but she felt as exhausted as if she had actually done it.

There hardly seemed any point in getting out of bed. She was doomed. Her life was ruined. Over!

Rolling onto her stomach, she dragged a pillow over her head and promptly went back to sleep. Nancy woke here a little later when she came in with fresh water.

"Are ye under the weather, then, Miss Melantha?" she murmured sympathetically.

"Thought ye'd be up and about by now."

She wished she was underground, in a deep, dark hole, she thought irritably. "I'm fine," she said, sighing tiredly. "I just did not sleep well last night."

"Ye nor nobody else, I 'spect! That bunch his lordship brought with him this time don't seem to have much notion of how to behave in a respectable household. Up till all hours drinkin' and playin' cards, they was, and woke half the house when they stumbled up to bed in the wee hours of the mornin'."

Reluctantly, Melantha threw the covers back and got out of bed. "I suppose that's why it's so quiet now? They're all still abed?"

Nancy shrugged. "Heard tell his lordship and a couple of 'em went out this mornin' to hunt."

Melantha sent her a quick glance as a flicker of hope surged through her, but then she realized Nancy had said 'some', which meant that some of them would most likely still

be in their rooms.

Dismissing it for the moment, she crossed to the washstand and washed her face and hands and cleaned her teeth. Feeling slightly more alert when she was finished, she moved her dressing table and settled on the bench. Nancy, who had stayed to gather the laundry, paused at the door. "Would you be needin' anything else, Miss Melantha?"

Melantha shook her head without looking at the woman, focusing on combing the tangles from her hair. She knew Nancy must be curious about the mess in the room from her temper tantrum the night before, but she was too embarrassed about it to acknowledge it. "I can manage, thank you, Nancy."

Still she hesitated. "I already helped your grandmother. I could at least stay and help you get the unmentionables situated before I go down."

It was too tempting. As hard as it was to undress herself without help, it was harder still to dress herself when everything she owned fastened in the back. Neatness didn't matter when she was removing the clothing.

"Yes, thank you! That would be nice."

Setting her brush down, she got up as Nancy dropped the laundry by the door and hurried to the armoire to look for underclothes. "How about this?" she asked, holding up a pair of linen pantalets.

Shrugging, Melantha took them. "It does not matter. Just what ever you lay your hand to."

Nancy tsked as she watched Melantha change and then handed her a chemise. "It doesn't matter? With the house burstin' at the seams with eligible bachelors?"

"They won't be seeing these," Melantha said absently. When she looked up she saw that Nancy was wearing a horrified expression.

"I should say not! I never meant to imply"

"I did not think that you did," Melantha said, cutting her off. "Do not pay me any mind. It is only that I have a touch of headache this morning." It wasn't actually a polite lie, now that she thought on it. Her head was throbbing.

Nancy was tsking again. "Mayhap ye are comin' down with somethin'?"

"It's called not nearly enough sleep."

Nancy frowned as she helped Melantha into the corset and began working the lacings. "I should get ye a dose of yer grandmother's laudanum and tuck ye back into the bed. Ye've dark circles beneath yer eyes now that I'm noticin'. An' there ain't no reason ta go down just now. Ye should be in yer best looks"

Melantha gave her a look. "As much as I hate to disappoint you, Nancy, I seriously doubt that a single one of the 'gentlemen' who came with my brother are what anyone

would describe as 'eligible'. Rogues and rakes, the lot of them, I expect, even if they had two pennies to rub together, which they probably do not. And even if they were eligible, they would have no interest in a long Meg with scarcely a farthing to her name. I would feel a fool to primp and posture for their benefit, and what's more, I would look it, for I'm no fresh young girl anymore, Nancy. I'm teetering on the brink of spinsterhood, and you know that as well as I do."

Nancy looked indignant. "I'll box their ears right fast if I hear 'em callin' ye such a thing!"

"No you won't! Not on my account, for I could not care less what they think!" Melantha said admonishingly. "And do not be listening at any doors and you are far less likely to hear it."

Melantha didn't know whether to be pleased or uneasy when she discovered that her grandmother was still in the breakfast room. Moving to the old lady's chair, she dutifully bent down to kiss her withered cheek. "Good morn, Grandmother! I hope you rested well," she said as cheerfully as she could manage.

"You are late to rise this morning," her grandmother responded. "I trust your night was not as bad as mine?"

Melantha was certain it could not have been, for no one ever surpassed her grandmother in difficulties.

"I do not believe I got a wink of sleep," she continued when Melantha made no attempt to argue with her.

Having helped her plate from the dishes on the buffet, Melantha settled in her usual seat. "I am sorry to hear that grandmother," she said with practiced sympathy, knowing full well that Nancy had dosed her with laudanum and her grandmother had most likely slept like the dead throughout the night. "Was it something you ate, do you think?"

Her grandmother frowned, thinking it over. "Now that you mention it, I did feel a bit queasy. Perhaps that ham we had last eve did not entirely agree with me. It was these old joints that were bothering me, though"

Pasting an appropriate expression of interest on her face, Melantha retreated into her own thoughts once she had primed her grandmother's favorite conversation. She was both relieved and disappointed, truth be told, relieved that she could see nothing at all to indicate that her grandmother was the thief and disappointed for the same reason. Her grandmother would not have simply taken the box, she knew. She would have taken the box only because and if she knew about the diary, and if she knew the diary was there she would have spent the entire night if necessary trying to figure out how to open the casket and get to it.

If she had succeeded in opening it and gotten the diary, she would certainly not have been able to prevent herself from lecturing Melantha over the things recorded on its

pages. If she had not succeeded, she would have been in a very foul mood indeed.

Of course, her grandmother could be extremely sneaky when the need arose. If she had been sly enough to sneak into her room and filch the box, she would certainly be clever enough to hide her glee over it.

Until she read it.

Melantha examined that theory for holes and decided it was possible that her grandmother had done it. Not very likely, she supposed, considering her behavior this morning, but it was worth looking in to.

Just for her own peace of mind and to eliminate the possibility so that she could turn her focus on the next suspect.

Having made up her mind to search her grandmother's room, she waited until they had finished eating and told her grandmother that she had decided to go riding to clear her head. Leaving her grandmother safely ensconced in the small parlor she preferred to use during the cooler months of the year, Melantha headed upstairs, listened intently for any sounds indicating that anyone else was up and stirring about and then walked briskly to her grandmother's room and went in. Thirty minutes later, Melantha emerged from her grandmother's room again empty handed and highly distressed. Biting her lip, she reminded herself that she had come up to change into a riding dress and hurried to her room to slip out of the morning gown she had put on when she went downstairs for breakfast. She had not realized just how much she had pinned her hopes on finding the casket in her grandmother's room until she had turned up nothing. Trying to assure herself that she had simply overlooked it in her haste to search the room and get out again before she was discovered, or that her grandmother had decided to hide the box elsewhere, she rushed into her habit and quickly tidied her hair.

"Is anything amiss?" Grandmother called as Melantha tried to tiptoe quietly past the parlor.

Caught, Melantha immediately turned about and moved to the door of the parlor. "Why would you ask that?" she asked a little breathlessly.

Grandmother shrugged. "It is only that it seemed to take you an extraordinary amount of time to change."

Melantha studied her grandmother's countenance keenly, but she could not see any sign that her grandmother was struggling to conceal amusement, suspicion, or anger--as she might be if she suspected what Melantha had been up to. "It is no easy task to change without assistance," she responded finally.

Grandmother widened her faded blue eyes. "Where was that lazy girl, Nancy? Why did you not summon her?"

Melantha's lips tightened. "She is not lazy. She is doing the laundry."

Grandmother gave her an indignant look. "Impertinent Miss! I do not think I care for your tone, young lady! And why, I would like to know, is my maid doing laundry?"

Melantha tamped her anger with an effort. "I beg your pardon, Grandmother. But there is no laundry maid any longer, nor an upstairs maid, or a downstairs maid, or a lady's maid for me--except for Nancy, who does it all and has since we had to let the others go."

Grandmother looked outraged for several moments, and then puzzled. "Why did we let them go?"

Melantha glanced up and down the corridor to make certain none of her brother's guests were about. "Because we could not pay them."

Grandmother blinked several times. "Why ... that's absurd! You have your portion, and I have mine, and dear Rupert maintains the house and servants. How are we to remove to the seashore without any servants?"

Melantha did not feel up to tackling that ticklish situation at the moment. "Could we sit down and talk about this when I have had my ride?"

Grandmother frowned. "Do not behave like a child who thinks if she can only put something off she can avoid a scold! If you have squandered your pin money and put us in a bind, you must tell me at once."

It took all Melantha could do to tamp the outrage that boiled up inside of her at that unjust accusation. She knew her grandmother had a tendency toward forgetfulness, but she could not think her grandmother believed such an outrageous charge for a moment. "I could scarcely squander what I do not have," she said evenly. "You know very well that 'dear Rupert' went through the bulk of my portion before I even reached my majority--before he started on yours."

This time Grandmother's frown was more thoughtful. "I do not recall ... Oh! I do remember he said something here while back about a problem with investments," she said vaguely.

Melantha pursed her lips irritably, but instead of pointing out that the only investments Rupert had made was in the comfort of his lifestyle, she merely excused herself and left while her grandmother was occupied with trying to recall the 'here while back' which had been nearly ten years ago.

She had not sent round to have a horse readied for her and paced the yard while the stable boy prepared her mount. The moment she had settled in the saddle, however, she kicked the little mare, in a rush to leave the dust of Remington Manor and her troubles behind her. The rude kick startled the mare into an awkward, half hearted gallop, which she maintained almost to the edge of the yard. By that time, however, she had recalled that she was no young filly and dropped into the brisk little trot she far preferred if she was forced to move faster than a walk.

Grinding her teeth, Melantha settled for what she could get and allowed the stubborn mare to have her way.

There was no justice in the world, she reflected darkly as she gave up the effort of trying to steer the mare from the path she always took through the woods. If there had been, the mare would have run away with her and they would have found her dead, battered body in the woods in a day or two when her grandmother finally remembered she had gone out riding. And then it would not have mattered at all who found the blasted diary because she would not have been around to know or care.

She was sorry she had been cross with her grandmother. And sorrier still that her grandmother was more inclined to blame her for everything that went wrong than Rupert, who was usually the one who made everything go wrong.

She supposed that she could understand it in a way. Her grandmother was as dependent upon Rupert's good graces as she was now. It was not wise to bite the hand that fed, even if the hand was reluctant to feed. She shrugged. Especially if the hand was reluctant to feed, she amended, for Rupert would only take a pet and disappear and 'forget' to send them anything at all and her grandmother knew that. Melantha was handier to blame, and far safer.

She still resented it, for it was grossly unjust.

Emerging from her abstraction after a while, Melantha discovered that there was a man leading a horse on the path. Irritation instantly flooded her, for she was in no mood to be required to be polite, and yet she had been distracted too long to veer away from the path now without appearing exceedingly rude.

It seemed unlikely that Blossom, her annoying mare, could have been persuaded to turn in any case, for she had no sooner seen the gelding on the path than she perked up and began to trot jauntily forward to greet him. Melantha glared at the mare's head, tightening her grip on the reins. "He's not likely to do you any good!" she hissed at the romance minded mare for all the attention the willful thing paid her.

"Good morning," the man greeted her as she drew abreast of him in a deep voice that sent a reluctant shiver of awareness through Melantha, particularly when coupled with the man himself, for as he lifted his head she saw that he was not at all the sort of man that one could pass and never notice. Tall and broad of shoulder, the fine tailoring of his attire emphasized a build that was as exceptionally appealing as the face above his elaborately tied cravat. His swarthy face was not boyishly handsome, but rather a mature, virile, and dangerously, predatory male countenance made up of harsh angles and planes. Above a blade of a nose with slightly flaring nostrils, straight, thick dark brows were drawn together in a faint frown above deep set, chillingly blue eyes. His hard, finely etched lips curled as he looked up at her, forming a smile that made her belly quiver with an attack of butterflies.

Melantha responded with a polite smile. "And to you, sir. Is there a problem?"

The man shrugged, moving closer and reaching up to offer his hand. "Phillip Knightly. I think my mount may have picked up a stone."

Gathering her reins in one hand, Melantha responded instinctively by giving him her hand. "Miss Mansfield." Uncomfortable with the flutter that her heart made when her hand was engulfed in his far larger one, she dragged her gaze from his with an effort and looked over at his horse, for she had not noticed the animal limping.

On the other hand, she had not even noticed the man until she was almost upon them and then she had noticed only the man. He helped her down when he saw that she was about to dismount, encircling her waist with his hands.

She had been helped onto and off of horses many times, by her brother, by grooms, even on occasion by one or another of her brother's cronies. She could not remember any time that she had given it a thought, much less been discomfited by it.

She had no idea why she felt so--intimate when he helped her from the horse, so aware of him as a man--the warmth of his hands through the fabric of her riding dress, the strength of them, and his powerful arms, the ripple of muscles beneath her own palms as she settled her hands lightly on his shoulders for balance. She could not name anything that he had done that was the least bit improper. Perhaps he was a little closer than he should have been, for her breasts brushed his chest as she slipped to the ground, and her face was near enough to his she might have brushed her cheek along his if she had turned her head but a little, but he released her at once and stepped away when she had balanced herself.

Dismissing her uncomfortable awareness of him with an effort, she moved toward his mount and urged the horse to lift his foreleg. She saw no sign of a stone, or bruise, or a loose shoe. "It was this leg?" she asked, frowning as she lifted her head.

Lord Knightly's gaze was focused somewhere in the vicinity of her breasts when she looked at him. He did not look the least discomfited to be caught at it. Nor did he leer at her suggestively and she could only conclude that he was not actually aware either that he had been studying her breasts, or that she had caught him at it. His dark brows came together over the bridge of his nose, lifting at the center in puzzlement.

There was something strangely appealing about the expression. A slow grin appeared that showed an appealingly white smile and equally pleasing laugh lines in either cheek that fell just shy of actual dimples. "No?" He stepped forward, grasped the horse's muzzle and studied him accusingly. "Faking brute?" he growled.

Melantha bit her lip, trying not to smile. "You are certain it was this foot?"

He sent her a pensive glance. "Now that you mention it, I am more certain that he was trying to bamboozle me, for he favored this one awhile and then the other."

Melantha looked at him doubtfully. "Perhaps it was the rider who decided he had had enough of the hunt?"

He shrugged. "If you are trying to get me to admit that I lost the party then you will be sorely disappointed. I was enjoying myself hugely, harrying about in search of an elusive stag--which no one, by the by, actually caught sight of--dodging the stray shot from my fellow hunters and picking branches from my teeth. It was Brutus here who decided he had had quiet enough."

Melantha could not help but chuckle at the picture he presented. "He is a fine horse. I can see why you would not wish to take a chance that he might actually be injured. Shall I keep you company on the long walk back?" she asked politely.

He studied her keenly. "Now I have a dilemma. Should I be equally polite and decline on the grounds that it would be rude of me to interrupt your ride? Or yield to my selfish desire for more pleasant company than Brutus here and take you up on the offer?"

Melantha shook her head, discovering that she was actually far more intrigued by the thought of keeping him company than she should have been. "You should accept with a clear conscience, for I am just as happy to walk back with you as I was perched upon Blossom, for she can not be persuaded to do more than mosey along this well worn track at a snail's pace, which is almost more annoying than enjoyable."

Catching Blossom's reins, she turned to retrace her steps to the manor. Lord Knightly fell in beside her. "She seemed lively enough when she caught sight of Brutus."

Melantha could not help but blush. "She is a shameless hussy."

He chuckled. It was such a rich sound that curled warmly inside of her and made Melantha smile in response.

"You are not much like Lord Mansfield."

Melantha sent him a wry glance. "You thought that I would be?" she asked, mildly surprised that Rupert had even mentioned that he had a sister. "In any case," she added conscientiously, "I am unfortunate enough to have his stature as you could hardly fail to notice, for I am no dainty miss."

His gaze moved over her face speculatively. "My memory must be amiss, for I remember him taller and a bit broader across the shoulders. In any case," he added, smiling faintly, "you are a dainty miss, for I have only a moment ago lifted you down from yon willful mare, and I did notice. A bit taller than the typical debutante, yes, but far and away from being a hulking brute like Rupert."

Melantha blinked, but since she could think of no response, she merely walked awhile, digesting that in silence. "Thank you," she said finally remembering her manners. "That was a very nice compliment," she added when he lifted one dark brow questioningly.

"Observation," he corrected her. "Compliment implies a polite lie and I have to confess I am more prone to brutal honesty than socially correct idioms."

Melantha studied his face, but he had the face of a gamester--unreadable when he

wanted to keep his thoughts to himself, however appealingly mobile it was when he was relaxed. "You are not much like the men who generally accompany my brother, if it comes to that."

His expression closed. "Now I wonder if I should take that as a compliment or otherwise?"

Melantha looked away. If she said it was a compliment, then she insulted herself by association by admitting her brother usually fraternized with men more like himself, and that he was a disreputable rogue. She was not entirely convinced in any case, that Lord Knightly was entirely a gentleman. He had the looks and charm of a rake, to be sure. "It was only an observation," she said after a moment. "Have you known him long?"

He frowned. "Not long ... and I can not claim to know him well, if it comes to that. I met him by chance at the club a few months ago. We played a few hands of cards, then and since. And I just happened to be with him and the others when they took the notion to go into the country for a bit of hunting and decided to tag along since I had nothing better to do as the season has not yet begun."

Melantha sighed at his mention of the season, wondering if it was anything she would ever get the chance to actually experience or if she was doomed forever only to hear others talk about it. She was sure that it could not be as she imagined it was, that her imagination had embroidered it into a fanciful fairytale life of excitement, but she did yearn to discover if it was even half as exciting as she thought it would be.

It could certainly not be as boring as the life she had.

"Will you be going to London for the season?"

Melantha glanced at him sharply and then looked away. A knot formed in her throat. "Rupert says perhaps next year," she said finally. Though he had said no such thing of late, it was what he had told her every time she had asked when she was to have her come out.

He looked surprised, but to her relief he did not pursue it. She was still thankful when she looked up just then and discovered that they had left the wooded trail and reached the grounds proper once more. "Thank you for bearing me company," she said absently as a groom came and took the reins of her horse.

Amusement gleamed in his eyes. "It was you who bore me company," he reminded her. Embarrassed, Melantha felt her cheeks flame. "Yes, but I expect I enjoyed the walk far better than the ride ... uh. I was very happy to do so. Excuse me. I must go and speak to Grandmother."

Mortified that she had given away just how much he had disordered her, Melantha departed with as much dignity as she could muster, refusing to look back although her back burned with the sensation of being watched. She chided herself for such conceit. He had probably not given her another thought. He would certainly not have had enough

interest in her to watch her departure, unless, of course, it was because he was taken aback by her rudeness and her gauche behavior.

Mentally kicking herself for behaving like a mindless chit only because a handsome rake had deigned to wave his hanky in her direction, she waited until she had entered the house and casually glanced toward the stables as she closed the door.

The discovery that he was indeed watching her made her heart execute a painful little flip flop in her chest and she slammed the door on the skirt of her riding dress. Gritting her teeth when she discovered she could not extricate herself without opening the door again, she eased it open just enough to free herself and slammed it again, this time without glancing to see if he had seen her because she thought she might bear it better if she did not know.

Chapter Four

She should have known, Melantha reflected, that her grandmother would be waiting to waylay her the moment she came in the door. The woman had a mind like a steel trap when it came to a promising argument. "I can not see that the ride has improved your disposition much," she called as Melantha set her foot on the first tread of the stairs.

Sighing, Melantha looked up wishfully at the upper hall, but turned and entered the small parlor where her grandmother, she discovered, was now ensconced in a chair near the window.

"Who is that young fellow that you were walking with?"

"One of Rupert's guests. Lord Knightly."

Grandmother frowned. "Knightly. Now where have I heard that name before? I can not quite place it."

"I expect that is because you met him last eve," Melantha said, pacing to the window to make certain that he was still near the stables. The last thing she wanted was for him to come in and discover that she and her grandmother were discussing him. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw him striding toward the house and she scurried away from the window abruptly.

"You will have the furniture stinking of horse if you are to be wallowing all over it in your riding clothes," Grandmother said testily the moment Melantha's rear touched the sofa.

Melantha came off the couch again, her ears attuned keenly toward the door that she had used to enter the house. Faintly, she heard the door open and close again and her nerves tautened with the expectation that he would appear in the hallway at any moment.

"And I am entirely certain that I was not introduced to him last eve. Quite handsome. I would not have forgotten a face or figure like that, my dear. I may be old, but I am not dead."

As this last comment coincided with the sound of approaching footsteps, Melantha cringed inside, wondering if her grandmother's voice was as loud as it seemed to her. "I should go up and change," she said quickly and then could have bitten her tongue at the arch look her grandmother sent her.

"Is that him then? You must tell him to come in and introduce himself."

Melantha met Phillip Knightly's amused gaze with an apologetic one of her own as he paused at the foot of the stairs and turned at the comment. He hesitated a moment and finally sauntered to the door. "Miss Mansfield, we meet again." He turned to look at her grandmother, whom Melantha saw to her absolute horror, was looking him over with patent appreciation.

If that did not wither his manhood, nothing could, for her grandmother was sixty if she was a day and looked every bit of it!

"Grandmother!" Melantha gasped, and then modulated her voice to more polite tones. "Let me introduce you to a friend of Rupert's. This is Lord Phillip Knightly."

"Sir Knightly if we are to stand on ceremony," he corrected her. "How do you do, Lady Mansfield? I had not expected to have the pleasure of meeting Lord Mansfield's sister and mother."

Grandmother preened herself. "Mrs. Greenhawe," she corrected him. "I am dear Rupert's maternal grandmother."

Lord Knightly glanced at Melantha, lifting one dark brow questioningly.

Melantha caught the glance but pretended she hadn't. "Grandmother has scolded me for not going up at once to change, so if you'll excuse me?"

She did not wait for more than an absent wave in her direction from her grandmother, but she could not help but feel guilty at the chiding glance Lord Knightly sent her for deserting him. Shrugging it off, for she was quite sure the man was accustomed to charming ladies of all ages, she made good her escape and went to her room to clean up and change.

The urge to linger and primp assailed her, but she refused to give in to it on principle--the principle that she did not want to leave her grandmother alone with the man long enough to divulge every sordid detail of her childhood and Rupert's, which she would given half a chance. And the principle that she would not feed the lonely hopes of the spinster's heart that fluttered in excited agitation in her chest.

The man had no interest in her, and even if he had some mild interest it would certainly wane the moment he discovered she had no dowry to speak of.

Therefore there was no point at all in allowing hope to germinate and a good deal of reason to remain practical, level headed, and not to encourage any interest and certainly not to encourage him to believe she had any interest.

Even if not for her circumstances, the diary loomed over her like a great, black cloud waiting to ruin her.

Sighing glumly, she headed downstairs again, wondering which of her brother's guests might have filched the chest and if they had had the chance yet to discover what was in it.

"Sir Knightly was just telling me that he only arrived at Remington Manor this morning early, and so I knew at once that your suggestion that that was why his name sounded familiar to me was not the case at all," Grandmother greeted Melantha when she returned to the parlor. "Oh! My dear! That gown! Why ever did you choose that thing? It was never flattering in the least to your complexion, if you must know, and it is positively ancient now! Why did you not put on one of those lovely gowns dear Rupert had made up for you a while back?"

Melantha wrestled with her embarrassment and her temper for several moments, wishing a hole would open up in the floor and swallow her when Knightly turned to survey her quizzically. Deciding not to attempt to pique his interest was one thing. Having her grandmother point out the flaws in her person and wardrobe was another matter altogether. "This is one of the lovely gowns dear Rupert had made up for me a while back," she responded as evenly as she was able. "And it is hardly ancient and I have never worn it more than once or twice because you always point out that it doesn't suit me, but since today is laundry day and Nancy has most everything from the house in the yard, I'm afraid this will have to do."

Grandmother's eyes narrowed at the testy response, but apparently she decided against scolding Melantha in front of their guest, which Melantha surmised to mean that her grandmother was excessively impressed with the man.

"I did not realize that you had only arrived at Remington Manor this morning, Lord . . . Sir Knightly," she said, trying to direct her grandmother's attention elsewhere. "Are you staying at the inn in the village then?"

"His valet and luggage arrived last night," Grandmother responded for him. "He rode from Belcherton this morning and I have been trying to persuade him that he must certainly stay here, for the inn in the village is not at all the sort of place he would like to stay."

"I would not want to impose on you and your grand-daughter, particularly when it appears that you already have a houseful as it is."

"Oh posh!" Grandmother waved that away. "It is Melantha and I who should apologize for"

Breathing, Melantha thought angrily.

"... not having removed as yet to the seashore as I had told dear Rupert we meant to do. But, as I am certain we shall"

“Not be going after all,” Melantha interjected before her grandmother could finish the statement. “Since we were unable to arrange accommodations, but there is no reason at all why Rupert and his guests should not enjoy their stay as they planned. And you are certainly as welcome as any, Sir Knightly.”

Both Knightly and her grandmother turned to look at her, Knightly with devilish amusement dancing in his eyes and her grandmother with stunned surprise and dawning anger. “I am certain we could arrange something,” Grandmother said with a determined smile.

Melantha smiled back at her. “Unfortunately not, Grandmother. I only just had the letter from the solicitor today saying that he deeply regretted that he would not be able to arrange the trip for us and was sorry that we would be disappointed.”

An arrested expression flickered over Grandmother’s face just as she opened her mouth to object, and she closed it again, thinking. “The solicitor?”

“Mr. ... Charmly,” Melantha invented without a qualm.

“Of Millensly?” Knightly asked with interest.

Melantha studied the laughter dancing in his eyes with distrust. She could not say she did not know, otherwise he, and her grandmother, would wonder how she had gotten his direction to begin with. “Yes,” she replied finally. “I am certain that that is it, though the name did not come to me at once.”

“A very good man, Mr. Charmly,” he pronounced. “I am as certain as I can be that if it could be done at all then Mr. Charmly would have managed it.”

Melantha favored him with a cautious smile, wondering why he had supported her outrageous lie and if he thought to turn it to his advantage in some way.

He shrugged. “If you are certain that it would not be an imposition for me to stay a short while then?”

“There! And have I not been telling you that we would be delighted for the company?” Grandmother said at once. “You must certainly stay a while as I am sure dear Rupert would be sadly disappointed if you did not. And so would we, would we not, Melantha?”

Rising, he bowed politely. “In that case, I will excuse myself and change into something a little more suitable for a lady’s drawing room.”

Melantha’s shoulders slumped when he had left the parlor and the sound of his boots on the stairs had faded into distance. “Dear Rupert will be so cross when he discovers that you have refused to remove to the seashore only so that you may flirt with his guests. And I am not pleased, if it comes to that, my dear, for I can not help but suspect that they are not the sort of young men who should be in a gently bred young woman’s company.”

Melantha gaped at her grandmother in dawning outrage. "Grandmother! It had not crossed my mind to ... flirt!" she hissed.

Grandmother gave her a look. "You need not act so missish with me, young lady. I saw the way you were looking at Sir Knightly."

"I was not looking at him in a 'way'," Melantha denied crossly. "I was merely trying to be polite to our guest--Rupert's guest. And I am fairly certain that you are right about them. They do seem a bit wild for polite society."

Grandmother shrugged philosophically. "They are all a bit wild when they are away from 'polite society', my dear, for they are men, after all. It is most unfortunate that we can not remove to the seashore, for I am convinced that nothing good can come of staying, regardless of what you may have in mind in conducting a 'hunt' of your own for a husband. Not that I am totally against the notion, mind you, for dear Rupert has been a bit remiss in settling you, but I can not think the men he has brought with him are the sort to be looking to settle down with a family."

Melantha ground her teeth, but forbore further argument knowing that she would make more headway arguing with a tree. She resented her grandmother's assumptions, but so long as she was willing to give up on the notion of going off to the seashore when they did not have the money to do so, Melantha supposed her reasons were not as important as the decision.

Melantha did not know whether to be glad or sorry that she saw nothing more of Sir Phillip, not that she went out of her way to 'happen' upon him. On the contrary, she was so irritated about her grandmother's suppositions that she went out of her way to avoid the possibility of running into him. As difficult as it was to get her mind off the diary and her need to search for it, she did not dare try to do so when the servants were about, and spent most of her day in the parlor with her grandmother catching up on her mending. It would have made her life far easier if the men had arrived without their own servants, for there were few enough in residence at the manor, but she had begun to realize that nothing in her life was going to be simple, boring, or easy until and unless she managed to recover her diary.

She had more than half expected that they would have a large company for meals, however, and in that she was disappointed for the men had apparently arranged to meet at the local tavern for luncheon, and stayed until supper, or went back.

Whatever the case, she and her grandmother ate in solitary splendor as usual, and she did find that somewhat disappointing. She and grandmother had, in fact, retired to their bed chambers by the time Rupert and his cronies decided to return to the manor.

It was as well they had, for it became evident fairly quickly that Rupert and his guests had not confined themselves to hunting and dining at the inn during the day. Several of the men were well into their cups when they arrived at the manor and within a little more than an hour it became equally evident that the party was only just warming up.

In the midst of a second restless night due to frayed nerves, Melantha lay in her bed listening to their boisterous camaraderie and wondering what it was that they were doing, or talking about, that they found so humorous. The answer that popped into her mind was not a pleasant one, and she did her best to dismiss it, but the longer she lay listening to the low murmur of voices punctuated at random intervals with hardy laughter the more convinced she became that one of the men below had stumbled upon her diary and was reading it for the amusement of his fellows.

Feeling vaguely nauseated at the thought, she chided herself. Rupert was with them, she reminded herself. Even if one of the other men had found it, and was crass enough to consider sharing it for the amusement of his cronies, they would not dare to do so in front of her brother.

She had to be wrong. Whatever it was that they found so amusing, it was nothing to do with her diary.

What was she thinking!

Rupert might well be the one reading it! If he had found the diary, he would certainly not flinch about reading it, or sharing it, and he would be laughing just as uproariously as anyone else.

She spent a good deal of time trying to think up a suitable revenge, aside from the revenge of being swung around his neck for the remainder of her life like an albatross, to avenge herself.

And then it occurred to her that Rupert had not been upstairs as far as anyone knew when the casket went missing. She had searched his room from top to bottom, too. It could not have been Rupert.

It had to be one of the others.

She stewed over that for a while before it occurred to her that all of them were downstairs and it was so late that very likely their servants had already gone to bed.

She had rolled out of the bed before she even fully formed the intention. Grabbing her dressing robe out of the armoire, she slipped into it and hurried to her door, listening intently before she opened it and peered up and down the corridor. She could hear them much better with the door open and there were no sounds that indicated the party was in any danger of breaking up any time soon.

The majority of her day might have been spent over her mending, but she had managed to discover which rooms had been assigned to Rupert's guests. The one nearest to her own room was still one wing over from the wing where her and her grandmother's rooms were situated, but then all of Rupert's guests were on that wing so she headed to the closest, Sir Knightley's room, first.

After scanning the corridor and listening for any sounds of movement, she tiptoed to the door and pressed her ear to the panel. When she was convinced the room was empty, she

eased the door open and peered around, her heart pounding so hard in her eardrums by now that a marching band could have passed without her noticing it. Thankfully, the room was unoccupied and she scurried inside, closed the door and began her search. Some twenty minutes later, her heart still fluttering, but more from exertion than fear, she discovered that she had thoroughly exhausted all possible hiding places ... except for one. Sir Knightley's portmanteau. Unfortunately, she discovered that it was locked. After glaring at the trunk for a few moments, she looked around the room again, but she had already searched it one time and she didn't recall having seen a key.

Frustrated, but too unnerved to continue to linger, she finally went to the door again, listened, and then went out. The next door along the hallway was currently occupied by Lord Blackthorne, whom she had not met, but she did know that he was traveling without a valet because the servants thought it very odd that a lord would travel without one under any circumstances. Melantha was not certain she agreed. It seemed rather silly to her mind that most of them had come to 'rusticate' and 'hunt' and had brought valets to attend their wardrobes.

More importantly, here she at least did not have to worry that there might be a valet waiting up for his master.

She listened at the door anyway just to be sure Lord Blackthorne had not decided to retire.

She was not quite as terrified when she peered into Lord Blackthorne's room as she had been when she had entered Sir Knightley's. She wasn't certain whether that was because she was growing accustomed to living on the edge of disaster, or if it was because she knew she didn't have to worry about a servant deciding to come in to turn down the bed or lay out his master's sleep wear. But whatever the reason, she was not in a lathered haste to check the room for all the good it did her to perform a slower more careful search.

She still came up empty handed, and she still found herself staring at the man's portmanteau as the last possibility in the entire room.

And it was locked.

"Damn and blast it!" she muttered, plunking her hands down on her hips in irritation. She wasn't going to get anywhere this way, for if every room held a trunk that was locked the blasted casket could still be in one of the rooms she had checked!

After glaring at the thing for a few moments, she finally pulled a pin from her hair and knelt down to see if she could pick the lock. She had been working on it until she had begun to think she would simply have to give up when she heard a very distinctive click.

Triumph flooded her. Shoving her hair pin back into her hair absently, she grasped the lid of the trunk and tugged. Nothing happened.

"May I help you?" asked a deep, distinctly masculine and icy cold voice from the

doorway.

Chapter Five

A wave of cold washed over Melantha followed so rapidly by a wave of scorching heat that she felt downright faint. For several endless moments, she could not even command herself to move.

Oh god! Her mind screamed. Run!

Unfortunately, absolutely nothing else on her body was working. It took a mental command and a conscious effort even to turn to look to see what had her. Her eyes widened until it felt as if her eyeballs were going to pop from her head when she saw the man filling the doorway.

Because he was filling the doorway.

She wasn't certain if it was her terrified mind that made a giant of him, or if he really was as impossibly tall and broad shouldered as he appeared, but it didn't take her more than five seconds to figure out that running was not an option.

His face looked as if it had been carved from stone. Unlike her, however, he was not frozen with fear. He was about as furious as she had ever seen, and hoped never to see again, any man who was that damned big.

She realized after gaping at him for several moments and wishing desperately that the floor would open and swallow her, or she could faint--or just drop dead from fright, that he was waiting for an explanation. Several more minutes spent frantically searching her mind for possibilities only churned up more dust.

Some of the tension seemed to ease from him. Crossing his arms over his chest, he swept a glittering gaze from the top of her head to her toes. "Let me guess--You're the maid? Come to collect the laundry?" he asked coolly.

Melantha's head began to bob the moment he began to speak again. Though she hardly grasped one word in five, maid sounded good.

His thick, black, demonically arched brows hitched a little higher on one side and descended threateningly over the other eye. "At one o'clock in the morning?" he asked pleasantly, his voice taking on the purring quality of a cat toying with its prey.

Melantha's jaw slowly slid to half mast.

He shook his head slowly. Melantha's head followed the movement as if he was her puppet master. "Your mistress must be a frightful termagant."

That comment finally penetrated the deep freeze holding Melantha and she began to notice cramping muscles and aching joints from having knelt so long in front of his portmanteau trying to pick the lock. She managed to swallow. It sounded loud in her ears and she wondered if he had heard it.

“As it happens,” he continued after a lengthy pause she finally realized was her opening to challenge his unflattering remark, “I do not keep soiled laundry in there.”

Melantha licked her lips. “No?” she managed to ask.

“And my servant has already seen to it.”

Melantha blinked several times rapidly. Instead of telling him she had had no idea he had a servant with him or demanding to know when the man had arrived, she shot to her feet abruptly. “Oh! Well, in that case I will just go then.”

He didn’t move. Not by the slightest tensing of any muscle in his very muscular body could she see any sign that he even intended to move any time in the near future.

Forced by her desperation to escape to jog her mind for something to say to win her freedom, Melantha searched her mind a little frantically. The only possibility that came to mind was so ridiculously unbelievable she hesitated even to say it, but she had nothing else.

“Actually,” she stammered, forcing a smile she hoped looked apologetic, “I am Rupert’s sister. I thought this was his room, you see. And ... and the thing is he had brought me a gift and I just could not contain my impatience. I thought I would get just a little peek at it.”

The gaze he raked down her this time was bold and frankly appraising, and Melantha could not dismiss the sensation of standing completely naked before him, as if he could see directly through her clothing and perceive every tiny flaw. He tilted his head to one side. Slowly, so slowly she hardly noticed it at first, his hard, uncompromising mouth tipped upwards at the corners in a smile.

It was not a particularly sweet smile. There was something about that smile and the gleam in his eyes that fisted in her belly like a milking hand, making the muscles clench and unclench spastically and drawing the strength and warmth from the rest of her body into that one tight little spot.

“Rupert’s sister?” he murmured musingly. His arms dropped. His shoulder came away from the door frame.

Melantha blinked and when she opened her eyes again, her vision was filled with broad chest, a strong neck and chin, an angular jaw. Dark stubble roughened his cheeks and jaw and the skin above his upper lip. A large hand curled around her jaw, tipping her face upward. His eyes, she saw, were black as sin, gleaming pools of dark emotions where fury lingered but had been surpassed by a far more dangerous passion. Around those black, black pupils, she saw a thin green-gold ring of color. “My own ‘sister’ is not nearly as beautiful,” he murmured, his voice silky, mesmerizing. “How much?”

Melantha blinked, remembered to breathe and dragged in a shaky breath, inhaling a whisper of his breath in the process. His taste and scent moved over her taste buds, invaded her blood like a fiery intoxicant. “You have a sister?” she whispered shakily,

feeling weak and dizzy and thoroughly disoriented.

Something flickered in his eyes. "Something tells me I would be far more pleased with you," he said, his voice husky now, faintly roughened.

Melantha stared at him perfectly blankly for a moment before her gaze dropped to his lips, which she discovered were hovering little more than an inch from her own, so close she could feel their warmth, taste his breath on her lips and tongue. Her mouth went dry as she studied that hard mouth, wondering what it would feel like against her lips, moving over her body. Swallowing with an effort, she lifted her gaze to his again and as she did her chaotic mind finally deciphered what he had said and what he had meant. Shock went through her. "Lord Blackthorne!" she gasped in a sudden burst of outrage, jerking away from him.

His arm came around her waist, jerking her solidly up against him.

Something hard, long and thick dug into her lower belly. It did not take much imagination, in fact none, to figure out what it was. "I am Rupert's sister!" she gasped.

"You are in your dressing gown and in my room. Have I mistaken your purpose for being here?"

Melantha gaped at him. "You have!" she snapped shakily.

He tilted his head slightly, his expression hardening once more. "Once is a mistake, twice an invitation, and it is immaterial to me who you are," he murmured harshly, releasing her abruptly.

It took Melantha a moment to realize he'd let her go. Her feet were on the move toward the door before it had fully registered. The cool air that struck her in the corridor sent a shiver down her spine and lent an extra kick to her gallop. By the time she reached the bend in the corridor she was running. She did not stop until she had slammed and locked her door securely behind her.

Leaning against it, she pressed a hand to her wildly galloping heart, trying to catch her breath. It did not slow appreciably. Finally she lifted a hand to her mouth. "Oh my god! That was the scariest man I have ever met in my life," she murmured.

Shoving away from the door she began to pace the room in agitation, trying to chase the fright back into a dark corner of her mind. "Well," she muttered after a while. "I think I can safely rule him out as a suspect. No need to check that room again!"

It boggled the mind even trying to imagine a man that big and scary creeping around Remington Manor in search of treasures to steal. Setting aside the fact that she could not imagine anything that big 'creeping' anywhere, there was absolutely nothing about him that suggested the sort of desperation that might inspire burgling. "No sense of humor! None!" she muttered as the image filled her mind of the cold assessment of his gaze. Almost instantly another image superimposed itself upon that one, of Lord Blackthorne's cold eyes piercing her over the barrel of a dueling pistol. "Cool. Yes, yes,

he could face anyone across a dueling field without a flinch, I expect.”

The wild pounding of her heart settled after a time, but agitation still gripped her. The thought of all the rooms she had not searched entered her mind but there was no way in hell she was going to risk another encounter like the one she had just had. Ruin paled beside the mind boggling possibility of trying to wrestle with any of the men Rupert had brought with him.

She moved to her bed after a while and flopped down on the edge of the mattress, but she was still in turmoil. She was not going to get a wink of sleep.

She got up and paced a while longer, but every time she thought about her encounter with Lord Blackthorne she had heart palpitations all over again. Her palms were sweaty with fear. Every muscle in her body was so tense that she scared herself when she whirled and caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror above her vanity.

It leapt into her mind then that her grandmother kept laudanum to help her sleep when she was distressed. She loathed the stuff herself, but she needed something to calm her nerves, and it was for damned sure she was not going to try creeping down the stairs for a nip of something in her brother's bar.

Moving to the door, she pressed her ear to it and finally eased the panel open and peered up and down the hallway. Seeing it was clear, she raced on tiptoe to her grandmother's room and opened the door slowly to peer inside. A gentle snore assured her that her grandmother was having no difficulty sleeping. It was dark in the room, but after her eyes adjusted to the dark, she realized that there was enough light filtering into the room from the moon and stars to make out the shapes in the room and identify them. In any case, she knew her grandmother's medications were kept on her bedside table.

Creeping across the room, she picked up first one bottle and then another and sniffed the contents since it had dawned on her forcibly that she had no desire whatsoever to down a dose of castor oil and spend the remainder of the night and most of the following day perched on the chamber pot. Fortunately, the scent of the laudanum was unmistakable. Holding her nose, she took a draught, fought the gag reflex that followed and managed to swallow the horrible stuff.

Feeling better at once, she closed the bottle and headed back to her own room. A yawn caught her unawares as she shut her door and secured the lock. Feeling far more woozy than sleepy, she moved carefully to the bed, dragged her dressing gown off and climbed onto the mattress, sprawling flat on her back and staring dizzily at the ceiling for a few moments before she closed her eyes tightly. In truth, the cure for her anxiety seemed worse in some ways than the agitation, but in a very few more moments she discovered she did not particularly care as blessed oblivion closed in around her.

It was a tickle of sensation that roused Melantha, brought her floating upward toward consciousness and at the same time stirred warmth low in her belly. For several moments it teased her mind that she was experiencing one of the delightfully stimulating

fantasy dreams. The tightening of something around her wrist wrenched her wide awake abruptly, however. Still disoriented, Melantha tugged at her arm and discovered she couldn't move it.

Her eyelids snapped open but she found that the room was as bereft of light as the inside of a cave, the darkness so profound she could almost feel it.

She lay perfectly still for several moments, feeling her heart rate leap from slow even beats to a rapid gallop as she tried to move and discovered her arms were bound at the wrists and her legs at the ankles.

Coolness wafted over her, and then warmth as someone leaned near.

"Where is it?"

A shiver skated down Melantha's spine. The voice was definitely male, but the whispered words made it impossible to identify the voice even if she had known it well enough to recognize it and she was suddenly very much afraid that she would not have recognized it. "I'll scream," she whispered shakily, finding her voice at last. "I'll scream the house down!"

Something warm and rounded that she finally decided was a finger tip touched her just below the collar bone and traced a path straight down her body, pausing at the thatch of hair that covered her mons.

She felt it all the way down.

"I don't think so. You're completely naked and tied spread eagle to your bed. If it's your desire to be found like this by your brother, your grandmother, the servants and the half dozen or so guests currently staying here, though, by all means scream."

The picture he painted so deliberately in her mind closed her throat suffocatingly. As if to emphasize what he had said, she felt her skin prickle in acute sensation, felt her nipples draw tightly. "How dare you!" she managed to get out in a croak of a whisper.

He grunted. She felt the bed dip as he settled on the mattress beside her. Almost casually, he traced a path with his finger again, this time circling her belly button, and then moving upward and circling her breasts in a lazy figure eight. Melantha held her breath, trying to close her mind to the finger but found it impossible. Her skin rippled beneath his touch, sending sparks of increased awareness through her. "I think you can safely assume that there is not much that I would not dare, all things considered."

The finger, to her relief, disappeared. "I know you know where it is."

Melantha licked her lips, straining to pierce the darkness and see the man she knew was hovering over her. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"I think you do," he murmured, his voice husky, but still too raspy and indistinct to identify. He said nothing for several moments, as if he was thinking. "Should I torture it out of you, I wonder?"

Fear closed over Melantha at that none too subtle threat.

She jumped at the first, light brush, expecting pain. Instead, the touch was so light she wondered if she would've felt it at all if every nerve ending in her body hadn't been standing on end seeking stimulation to tell her what was going on around her. The touch traveled up and down her body in slow, mesmerizing circles. Goosebumps erupted all over her as it stroked over her breast, circled one nipple and then glided back and forth over the tip, stirring currents of warmth in her breast and a tightening sensation in her lower belly.

She was having trouble controlling her breathing by the time it ceased to circle her nipple and traveled down into the valley between her breasts and then around and around the other breast in ever tightening circles until she grew tense with anticipation. She let out her breath with a slight gasp of sound as it brushed across her other nipple, back and forth, lightly, just enough to tease her with the need for something more substantial.

It was a feather, she realized as the soft brushing moved on, traveled up the side of her neck and down again.

A feather. He was stroking her body with a feather.

Almost the instant that filtered into her mind, her thoughts leapt to her diary.

"You bastard! You stole my diary---and you read it!"

A hand clamped tightly over her mouth right in the middle of the word bastard, cutting her off so that the remainder of the accusation was a muffled murmur of anger against his palm. Tsking, he leaned toward her. Teeth dug into the nipple he had just teased to exquisite sensation, knocking the breath out of her. She made a frightened sound against his palm, squeezing her eyes closed against the pain she expected to flood through her at any moment. Instead, after bearing down slowly until she had stilled in discomfort, he covered the tip with his mouth, sucking it like a ripe berry.

Fire coursed through her in a wave that stunned her. Her lungs felt as if they had collapsed. Tensing all over, she curled her fingers into the palms of her hands, digging her nails into the sensitive flesh, but even that was not enough to pull her mind from the sensations coursing through her from the feel of his mouth.

Feeling as if she was falling into a dark pit of live coals, she struggled to evade the heated torture of his mouth, shifting, bucking, and twisting. Again, he caught the tip of her nipple between his teeth, pinching warningly, bearing down harder and harder until she abruptly went still. When she did, he covered the tip with his lips again and sucked on it until Melantha thought she would pass out from the heat that enveloped her. For a few moments she continued the fight internally, but her resistance faded rapidly, drained away by the mesmerizing lure of the pleasurable tension building inside of her until she was no longer certain whether she wanted him to stop or keep doing it until she could

stand no more.

By the time he lifted his head, she was so consumed by the need to drag enough air into her lungs through her nostrils that her mind was liquid with the swirling intoxicant that filled her blood stream and sizzled along every nerve ending. And she had lost awareness of everything except the pull of his mouth on her flesh and the gathering heat and moisture and tremors in her quim.

Coolness washed over her when he lifted his mouth at long last and the heated moisture left by his mouth on her breast seemed to freeze over, sending a shiver through her. Slowly, his hand eased from her lips. She gasped in a sharp breath of air, filling her burning lungs, struggling now against the heated stupor she had fallen into.

As her body cooled, her breathing slowed and her heart ceased to beat frantically, her body returning reluctantly almost to normal except for the tension that seemed to remain stubbornly, she began to wonder if he had left. Even as she turned her head to try to locate the shadow within the shadows, she felt the warmth of his breath on her nipple, the one he had already teased until she thought she would go mad. She gasped in a sharp breath to protest, but he covered her mouth with his hand at once, nipping painfully at the nipple that was still swollen to painful sensitivity.

She cried out against his hand, going still. "Pain or pleasure. Your choice ... as long as you're quiet. One scream, one threat of a scream and the choice is no longer yours."

Melantha swallowed, nodding her head to let him know she understood. His hand eased on her lips but did not disappear, hovering lightly against her lips. Again, his mouth covered her nipple. She flinched, more than half expecting the pain of before. Instead, he sucked it, drawing forth the dizzying heat in a mind sundering rush, more rapidly than before. She fought it, struggling to keep her wits about her, but he ignored her internal battle, sucking and teasing the sensitive tip until her will collapsed beneath the tender assault.

The tremors centering in her quim spread outward until she was trembling all over, until she felt feverish from the heat emanating from her body, until she could no longer remain still. A soft sound of distress escaped her lips in spite of all she could do.

His hand tightened momentarily over her lips and then disappeared. He lifted his head. Disappointment filled her.

Gasping, shuddering, she wrestled with the pounding waves of pleasure as they slowly ebbed.

"Where is it?"

The question baffled her. She could not collect her wits enough to make any sense of it at all for many moments, but as her body began to cool again and her brain began to function, she remembered what he'd asked her before he'd begun to torment her with his mouth until she was ready to scream.

He had read her diary.

“The papers that were in the casket,” he prompted, impatience in his voice now. “Where are they?”

For several moments more, confusion still gripped her, but abruptly she remembered the yellowed, ancient looking legal papers she had taken from the box.

The problem was it did not immediately come to her just where she had put them.

He was not a patient man. She was still trying to think what she had done with the papers when she felt his heated breath on her breast again. “No!” she gasped.

She was immediately sorry she had. He covered her mouth with his hand and nipped at her hard enough it sent a sharp jolt of pain through her. She stilled instantly, panting against his palm.

He waited. Just as the pain mellowed into a spreading warmth, he tugged at her nipple again, began to suck it. A faint groan escaped her as she felt herself descending again into the madness, the heat engulfing her so quickly that she was thrashing restlessly against him in moments. Desperation took hold of her. Not the need for him to stop, but the need to feel his mouth on the nipple he had so assiduously ignored until it throbbed ceaselessly, almost painfully.

She began to think she would lose her mind as the tugging continued, draining her of her will, of her strength, of awareness of everything except his mouth and the coiling, miserable tension in her body that began to demand surcease.

She felt like weeping when he stopped again, because he had stopped.

“Where is it?”

Her mind snagged on the question at once, but she was too caught up in the screaming demands of her body to think of anything beyond that. She licked her dried lips, trying to think of what to say that might put an end to the torment. “Please,” she whispered, wondering herself whether she was begging him to stop or torment her more because she had begun to crave it, the heat of his mouth, the faintly rough stroke of his tongue. Her entire body felt like it was on fire, and she knew instinctively that what it was burning for was his touch, not the absence of it.

This time when he leaned close, she felt the heat of his breath on the nipple he had neglected. She held her breath, hoping he would take it into his mouth, fearful he wouldn't.

He nipped at it, gently, but her nipple was so painfully swollen with need it took no more to send a mixture of pleasure and pain stabbing through her like a knife. She uttered a choked cry before she could stop it. “Where is it?”

Melantha was ready to beg him to suckle it as he had the other sensitive tip, to say anything to get him torture her more with excruciating pleasure. Before she could

moisten her dry mouth to speak, however, a loud clatter invaded the room, the sound of someone slamming bodily into the floor at the head of the stairs.

Melantha jerked all over.

Her torment's head snapped up. She felt the movement, felt the sudden tension all around her. He moved away from her as they heard the sound of someone stumbling over the body on the floor, or perhaps scuffling with him. She felt the ties around first one ankle and then the other vanished as he whipped them off.

"It appears we may have company, for if I am not mistaken your brother's guests have decided to retire and I would just as soon not linger in case they mistake your room for their own."

Melantha dragged her legs up as she was released, curling them close to her body, lifting her head and staring hard into the darkness as she heard his footsteps retreat across the room. "You can't leave me like this!" she hissed, fearful that whoever was outside the door would hear her.

She caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure at her window briefly as he thrust the drapes aside.

"Alas I must, but don't despair. I will be back. You can count on it."

Too stunned to discover that she was being abandoned with her wrists still bound to the posts to think beyond that and the threat of being discovered, Melantha began jerking and twisting against her bindings, alternately rotating and twisting at her wrists.

Abruptly, one came free and dropped limply to the bed. Sharp pinpricks of pain shot through her arm and it took an effort to roll onto her side and pick at the other binding with her swollen, nearly useless fingers.

She discovered then that she was not tied at all. Something soft had been twisted around her wrists and then tied to the bedpost.

Dismissing it for the moment, she stumbled out of the bed and ran to check the door. Relief flooded her when she discovered that it was bolted. Shivering, she turned to look toward the window. The drapes were billowing outward as air rushed into the room.

Light filtered into the room, as well, enough to make out the dark shapes around her and assure herself that she was alone. After a few stunned moments, she moved to the window, checked behind the curtains in frightened, jerky movements and finally pushed the drapes aside and looked out.

He had gone out the window, she thought blankly, staring down at the yard far below. There was no body sprawled at the bottom, and when her mind finally accepted that, she glanced around, trying to figure out how he had gotten down.

There was a ledge not far below her window, but hardly wide enough to stand on. A little further along the outer wall, she saw the rose trestle where her grandmother's

favorite roses climbed.

She would not have thought it was substantial enough to support anyone's weight, let alone a full grown man, but he had to have gotten inside somehow.

Abruptly, she remembered that she had heard him turn the latch on the window, and it certainly had not been open while he was ... doing that to her.

Pulling the window closed jerkily, she latched it and searched the room like a blind woman for her night gown, unwilling to light a candle when she could still hear sounds beyond her door indicating that the stranger in her bed had been right. Her brother's guests were all stomping, or stumbling up the stairs.

Or maybe not all of them?

Certainly not Lord Blackthorne, for he had gone to his bed hours ago--probably chuckling to himself about scaring her witless.

No. She had forgotten. The bastard had no sense of humor!

Dismissing all of from her mind, she searched until she discovered that the thing that had been twisted around one of her wrists was her nightgown. Gritting her teeth, she dragged it over her head and fastened the buttons down the front with shaking hands before she climbed into the bed again.

Sleep was the furthest thing from her mind, but she dragged her blankets up under her chin, staring at the darkness around her.

He had said he would come back, and there was absolutely no doubt in her mind that he had meant it, and no confidence in her at all that he would not dare try anything like that again.

And the worst of it was that she could do absolutely nothing about it without risking that everyone would find out why he had come into her room.

Chapter Six

Melantha supposed that she should not have been surprised that her grandmother had not seemed to notice anything amiss with her when she had come down, for she never did. She should have been glad that she had not.

She was, but somewhat put out, as well, for she had been certain when she looked into her mirror and saw the dark circles beneath her eyes from so little sleep that it would be obvious to everyone who looked at her that she had just spent the worst night of her life.

She was sore from straining at the bindings around her wrists and ankles, and there were tell tale bruises there, as well, not just beneath her eyes, faint, to be sure, but she had noticed them and it had made her belly flutter strangely when she had. She had almost been afraid to come downstairs, and she supposed she should feel nothing but relief that no one had noticed, and yet it was very distressing that no one at all had noticed the

signs of her suffering.

It would have been nice to have gotten a little sympathy, even if it had put her in the uncomfortable position of having to lie about why she had spent such a horrible night.

Sighing despondently, she paused on the walk and lifted her head to look around a little absently. She had decided to take a turn in the garden to clear her head, but she could not think the exercise was going to prove fruitful.

An observant parent would have seen that as an indication of distress, she thought irritably, for it was fall and the gardens were already looking withered and forlorn, and yet her grandmother had only waved her off absently. Uttering another long suffering sigh, she moved to the bench she had spied and settled on it beneath the indifferent shade of a tree that had already lost perhaps half of its leaves.

She had not slept after that man had departed. At least, she had dozed off a couple of times, but each time she had her mind had immediately been filled with dreams that replayed the incident over and over and she would wake up with a jerk, feeling worse than if she had not slept at all. A shiver went through her.

It had not felt at all like she had thought that it would feel when she had been fantasizing about a man doing such things to her. Truthfully, she supposed it had been somewhat similar, but when she had only been imagining it, and had not experienced it, the sensations had merely been pleasant. She had never dreamed a man could make her feel so desperate and achy and needful only by kissing her breast and he had not even touched her anywhere else. Only that one place until she was near to screaming at him to kiss her somewhere else, anywhere else--everywhere else!

She felt her face heat at the thought, partly because of the thought and partly because the moment the thoughts entered her mind, her nipples and her quim grew engorged with blood, became as swollen and achy as they had last night when the stranger had tormented her with his mouth.

Irritated with her reaction to the memory, and embarrassed by her reaction the night before--which she knew very well that he had been completely aware of, she jerked her mind away from it, gazing angrily at the dead patch of flowers across from her for several moments.

It occurred to her after a moment to wonder why he had done it. She had suspected at once that he had read her diary. She still suspected it. But she was not so naïve as to think that she had thought up something that no one had ever thought of before, and certainly there had been nothing about his behavior to suggest that he would not be very intimately acquainted with a woman's body.

It had been pitch black in the room, so dark that she had only been able to make out a vague shadowy figure among the other shadows, and yet he had none exactly where and how to touch her to drive her mad with wanting.

So she could not entirely put the events down to familiarity with her diary, and even if he had read it, why that? She had dosed herself with laudanum, had been so deeply asleep that he had undressed her and tied her to the bed without rousing her from her slumber. He could have done anything to her. He had certainly had her completely at his mercy once she had awakened, for she had not been able to evade him.

Pain? Or pleasure?

A shiver skated through her at the memory of those whispered words, but he had not hurt her whatever that suggested of his intentions. And he had been angry. She had heard it in his tone.

Could she trust from that that he would not hurt her? Or was she to take the threat in his words, and the painful little nips of his teeth as forewarning?

It had not hurt. It had stung, but it had heightened her awareness beyond anything else he had done, had seemed to tremendously magnify the pleasure that came immediately afterward. Had that merely been part of the game to torment her with her own body?

Pushing those thoughts from her mind with an effort, she turned to puzzling how he had come to be in her room, and who he was, again, for she had spent much of the night examining those questions. Her door was locked when she checked it and so had the window been, for she had become certain that she had heard him unlock it when he went out.

And that meant exactly nothing. He could have come in through either one and latched it behind him, either to make certain that he was not disturbed, or from force of habit.

He knew about the papers in the box, which made it impossible to dismiss the fact that he was the one who had taken it. He might or might not have read the diary.

Truthfully, she could not imagine that her diary would have particularly titillated such a man, and if he had been expecting to find those papers and found her diary instead, she doubted very much that he had been in the mood to read her ramblings. Perhaps he had flipped through it to see if she had mentioned what she had done with the papers?

His knowledge of the papers, his apparent knowledge of everything that was going on at Remington Manor was her strongest clue of who the man was, but even so she had no absolutes. He had some kind of connection with the house itself, or the former inhabitants of the house. He also had a connection with the current occupants.

She could not picture him as a servant. His voice had been little more than a whisper at any time, but his speech patterns had been educated and cultured.

He must be one of Rupert's guests, she concluded. It was the only thing that seemed to fit everything, the knowledge of the present and the past.

Although she had a hard time imagining Rupert, even in his cups, talking about the Manor and its inhabitants. Besides which, she was fairly certain that Rupert had not

known of the existence of the casket, and therefore the papers, himself, so he could not have passed that information to anyone else.

It was easy enough to figure out why he had left by the window. There had been no alternative but to stay and risk discovery, for Rupert and several of his guests had been directly outside in the corridor, falling down drunk and struggling to make it to their rooms.

Realizing she was getting no where with that line of thought, Melantha rose impatiently from the bench to walk again.

Except for the fact that she wanted to know the identity of the man who had behaved so familiarly with her the night before, who it was was not the crux of the problem, because knowing the identity of the man was not going to help her get her diary back, or help her prevent the man from coming back as he had promised he would.

Crossing her arms over her chest, she rubbed her hands along her arms to banish the goose bumps that rose at the thought.

She could just give him the papers and he would go away--she thought, but what if he did not? What if she gave them to him and he continued to torment her, this time for something else? And what about her diary? If she gave him the papers, and that was all that he wanted, she would have nothing to bargain with to get the diary back.

She stopped abruptly in her tracks at that thought, because immediately behind it an image arose in her mind of her trying to negotiate with the shadowy stranger and turmoil erupted inside of her as every sense and thought broke into diametrically opposed opinion. Fear warred with temptation and anticipation. Her body leapt with excitement and then went cold with anxiety.

She could not negotiate with the man, not a man like that.

What had she been thinking?

She did not want him to come back, at all! She certainly did not want to refuse him if he did and force him by her refusal to come again, and again, while they wrangled back and forth over the diary and the papers!

Shuddering, she scrubbed her hands along her arms and walked a little faster, as if she could outrun the temptation/fear that was creating havoc within her.

The worst of it was that she did not know where the twice damned papers were! She had wracked her brain for the answer almost as much as she had wondered fearfully about everything else, and she could not recall what she had done with them. She had thought they might be important, and she knew she had not thrown them away for that reason, but she could not remember what she had done with them. It had been nearly a year since she had found the casket and decided to use it.

She did not think it would be wise to tell the stranger that. He seemed pretty set on

getting them, and very unlikely to believe her if she said she could not remember what she had done with them. It might almost be worse if he did believe her, because then he would have no use for her at all!

She stopped at that thought and looked around a little vaguely. Realizing that she had come full circle in her ramblings, she moved to the bench again and dropped onto it.

She would have to try to find the papers, she told herself. And she would have to make certain that she locked her door and window carefully at night hereafter so that he could not get in without making a good deal of noise and rousing the household.

The thoughts did not comfort her much. He might well have a key to her room if he was as familiar with the house as he seemed.

Of course, if she could find the diary and reclaim it, most of her troubles would be behind her. But she had not had much luck with that so far. And her encounter with Lord Blackthorne the night before, even though it had been tremendously overshadowed by her dealings with the intruder later, had not only thoroughly rattled her, it had seriously undermined her confidence that she could retrieve her book without being discovered.

If Lord Blackthorne had not absolutely terrified her, she would have been extremely insulted by his behavior. Grudgingly, she admitted that he had had more than enough reason for his assumptions and his behavior. As he had pointed out, she had been in his room, and she had not been decently dressed.

She found it most annoying that the man's masterful behavior had thrilled her far more than it had frightened or insulted her. She had not, in fact, thought to be insulted by his insinuations until much later, when she had had time to go over the incident several more times and had digested the comments he had made. It embarrassed her to realize just how breathless she had been with anticipation when she had thought that he might kiss her with that ruthlessly hard mouth of his.

If ever she had needed proof that she was withering at the vine that was certainly it! It was humiliating to realize that she had become so desperate for any sort of male attention that she could be thrilled beyond belief by the wrong sort of attention, and from a man who was obviously a hardened rake!

Well, she would not give him another thought!

Granted, he was an exceedingly, dangerously attractive man, but he was certainly no gentleman and not worthy of a second thought.

She was not so desperate as to throw away any chance of one day having a home and children of her own. If she had been, she would not be willing to risk so much only to recover that blasted diary!

Given her dark thoughts, she was not particularly pleased when she looked up to discover that Sir Knightly had joined her in the garden and was walking directly toward her. It was too much to hope, she supposed, that he would merely exchange pleasantries

with her and move on, for such things never transpired to be the case when one wished to be alone.

Since it occurred to her forcefully, though, directly after that thought that he was a potential culprit, not only for the theft of the diary but the outrageous liberties that had been taken with her the night before, she decided that now might actually be the best of times for finding out. No doubt, he would be on his guard, if Sir Knightly were indeed her nemesis, but she was on guard, as well, and she might be able to tell something from his behavior toward her.

Instead of looking away, therefore, and pretending she had not noticed him, she studied him covertly as he approached her. His gaze was frank as it met hers, not the least bashful as she thought he should certainly feel if he had been the one taking liberties with her, but his blue eyes were also dancing with amusement and she did not quite like that. "You are certainly bored or you would not have chosen such a dismal spot for reflection," he commented as he reached her.

Melantha looked around at the garden a little vaguely.

"Don't tell me," he added when she made no comment. "You were afraid that if you went riding you would come upon another fiendish rake who would accost you with the weak tale of a thrown shoe?"

Melantha could not help but smile. "You are saying that it was all contrived, I suppose?" He looked askance at the space beside her and when she nodded and moved down a little to accommodate him, took a seat beside her. "I should not admit that, should I?"

She did not know how to take that and he grimaced at her expression. "Ouch! I believe that I will not admit it, then, since you are so obviously not dazzled by the prospect that I might have contrived it only to make your acquaintance. I stand by my original tale of woe. Brutus lied to me."

Melantha smiled tentatively. "I think you are an outrageous flirt, Sir Knightly."

"You will not tell anyone, will you? I fear it would damage my reputation."

That comment dragged a chuckle from her, but her smile collapsed even as she glanced at him, for she saw that Lord Blackthorne had stepped from the garden door. Their gazes clashed briefly before she looked away.

"A dark fellow, moody," Sir Knightly commented coolly. "If not for the fact that there is no air of artifice about him, and none of overweening conceit, I might suspect that he was striving for the look of a tortured poet."

Since Sir Knightly was looking in that direction already, Melantha sneaked another peek. To her relief, he was no longer staring toward her. Instead, he was focused upon the cheroot he had clamped between his teeth and the Lucifer he was using to light it. As the match flared and puffs of smoke veiled his harsh face from her view, she dragged

her gaze away again.

“I collect you refer to Lord Byron’s influence?” Melantha murmured, mildly pleased that she was at least not so cut off from society that she had no notion of what he referred to.

Knightly looked at her in surprise. “You are a fan of his poetry?”

Melantha blushed faintly, for she could hardly be a fan when she had not read any of his works. “Will you think that I am incredibly gauche and countrified if I admit that I am not particularly fond of poetry and have not read any of his work?”

Something akin to admiration gleamed in his eyes. “I will only be incredibly relieved, for I must tell you I am no hand at quoting poetry, even in the pursuit of impressing beautiful women.”

Smiling, Melantha shook her head.

“Now what have I said to throw you into such adorable confusion?”

Melantha’s blush darkened, but she chuckled. “I do not know what to make of you, Sir Knightly, beyond the fact that you are a shocking flirt. For one moment you are quite frank and honest and the next you revert to the most outrageous flattery. I think I will merely be polite and say thank you, and pretend that I do not realize that you are bamming me.”

He laughed outright at that, not looking the least put out that she had seen through his ham-handed flattery. “You are unconventional to say the least.”

“Oh dear! I hope that does not mean you think me odd,” she responded. She supposed she should have been put out, but she actually found he was far too charming for her to take exception to his practiced flattery.

“Not odd. I would be more inclined to call it refreshing.”

She was still smiling when she glanced up and discovered that Lord Blackthorne had settled his shoulders against the back wall of the manor and was watching the two of them together.

She thought he was watching. With the distance that separated them, he might merely have been gazing absently in their direction. Or, he might have been drawn to glance toward them at that particular moment by Knightly’s laugh.

Whatever the case, she found that her enjoyment had vanished, for she could not help but wonder if he was thinking of their encounter the night before and wondering if, despite her protestations, she was not the lady she claimed to be.

“Would you care to walk a bit?”

Melantha dragged her gaze from Lord Blackthorne with an effort, smiling politely in response, but she sighed and shook her head. “I should probably go in and check to see

how luncheon progresses.”

“It is early yet to be worrying over that, surely?”

Melantha smiled more easily. “You only say that because you are not hungry yet, but if I do not check on cook, there may be nothing when you are hungry.” She frowned. “Will you be dining with us today? Or has everyone made other arrangements?”

He rose and helped her from the bench. “I could not say. I am fairly certain that our host has not yet arisen and so I have no notion of what has been planned for the day.”

“Then I suppose I should go and see what I can discover before I speak to cook.”

Melantha had more than half hoped that Lord Blackthorne would move away when he saw her and Sir Knightly returning to the house. When he did not, she promised herself that she would not meet his gaze. She would merely gaze in his general direction and nod politely when she passed.

She found she could not help herself, though. As she came abreast of him, her eyes were drawn to him as by an invisible force. A frisson went through her when he met her gaze. Her heart executed an uncomfortable little gallop. It took a strenuous effort to look away and nod as she had told herself she would.

Sir Knightly opened the door for her but paused beside Lord Blackthorne, pulling a cheroot from his own breast pocket. “A fine day for hunting, wouldn’t you agree, Lord Blackthorne?” he asked cheerfully as he lit it.

When Melantha turned to close the door behind her, she saw Lord Blackthorne’s gaze rake Sir Knightly speculatively. “That would depend, I suppose, on what it is you are hunting,” Lord Blackthorne responded, his voice deep, his tone chilling.

Melantha closed the door.

The conversation seemed innocuous enough, but Melantha had the feeling that it was not. Knightly’s tone had been almost challenging, as if he had taken exception to something Lord Blackthorne had said. Which was absurd, of course, for Lord Blackthorne had said nothing at all. She supposed, though, that he might have seen something in Lord Blackthorne’s expression that he did not like.

The vague suspicion that their conversation might have something to do with her, she dismissed as overdeveloped imagination and the strange conceit of those who suffered from a lack of self-confidence. For it always led them to believe people were staring at them, or talking about them, when the sad truth was that no one noticed them at all.

She had paused just inside the small parlor to ask her grandmother’s advice on luncheon when Rupert trudged down the stairs, entered the parlor behind her and sprawled on her grandmother’s needlework, which she had just set on the seat of the sofa. “Oh, Rupert! Get up at once!” she gasped, making a grab for her needlework and checking it carefully for her needle once she had managed to drag it from beneath him. “You are fortunate

you did not prick yourself on this thing!”

She studied him a moment. “Dearling, are you unwell?”

Melantha eyed her grandmother indignantlly. She had had the worse experience of her life the night before, and looked it for she had hardly gotten a wink of sleep and her grandmother had not even given her a second glance! Now Rupert, who certainly deserved to feel the worse for his behavior the night before finally drags himself from his bed and it nearly noon and she is beside herself with worry? Over a hangover? “Of course he is not well, because he was well to fly last night, were you not Rupert?”

Rupert put his hand to his head. “That you, Mel? Could you keep it down a bit? My head’s fit to split wide open.”

“Oh! You poor darling!” Grandmother gasped, jumping up at once and beginning to fuss over him. “Let me get you something, my dear. What do you think would make you feel better?”

Melantha favored her brother with a narrow eyed glare. “Some of that special tea of yours, Grandmother,” she suggested sweetly.

Grandmother looked at her quickly. “Yes! That is just the thing, I am certain of it. Rest, my dear. I will brew it for you myself!”

Rupert gave her an evil look when their grandmother had bustled out of the room. “Low, Mel. That was really low, even for you.”

Melantha favored him with a cat-that-ate-the-canary smile. “If you would prefer, dear Rupert, I could get you a nice plate of runny eggs and rare beef.”

He turned green. Clapping a hand to his mouth, he surged off the sofa and headed toward the window as quickly as he could, shoving it open and leaning out at the waist.

“Was it something I said?” she asked sweetly, turning to beat a retreat before he recovered enough to consider violence.

She ran headlong into a broad chest, wallowed around for a moment while she tried to catch her balance and finally managed a wobbly step back.

He caught her, gripping her upper arms to steady her, and Melantha looked up to discover she had blundered into Lord Blackthorne. For once, his eyes were gleaming with unholy amusement. The discovery captivated her. She had not realized until that moment how absolutely devastatingly handsome the man was, for it took her breath to look into his eyes, pushed the world so far away that she was scarcely aware of the disgusting gagging noises Rupert was making at the window across the room. “I beg your pardon,” she said a little vaguely.

His hard mouth softened, curled faintly at one corner. “Think nothing of it. I rather think I enjoyed it.”

Blinking in confusion, Melantha excused herself and hurried out to join her grandmother in the kitchen, wondering whether he had meant that he had enjoyed their 'waltz' or her nasty trick on Rupert.

Either way, she discovered that she had been wrong about him.

He did have a sense of humor.

"Rupert was violently ill all over your prized tea roses, Grandmother," she announced cheerfully when she reached the kitchen. "I do not think he will need the tea after all."

* * * *

Melantha found that she simply could not sleep. She had tried all day long to convince herself that the man would not dare to come back, but she had failed miserably. She could not even convince herself that he would not come back tonight, not when he had been only the night before. He would wait, if only to torment her, before he came again.

If he came again.

As exhausted as she was from so little sleep the night before, she had been reluctant even to go to her room until she had felt that she would nod off in the parlor. Certain then that she was simply too tired to worry about the possibility that he would try to come into her room again, she had gone up, dressed for bed, and checked the latches on the door and window before climbing into bed--and then lain awake and gotten up two or three more times to check the latches, just to be sure.

But each time she lay down, certain she was safe, certain that she was so tired nothing, not even the treat of death, could keep her awake, her eyes had popped wide open, her ears had pricked, and her mind had begun to suspect every slightest creak and groan of the old manor was a footstep.

Eventually, she reached a point, though, when even her instincts no longer protected her or prevented her from dropping into the void.

* * * *

Melantha became aware of a growing sense of pleasurable tension. She shifted restlessly, welcoming the delightful dream, trying to conjure her lover in her mind.

His mouth at her breast made heat curl in her belly, made her ache for more, wish she could feel the sensation on her bare skin.

That thought made her surface instantly from sleep to awareness and she realized she was not dreaming a man was suckling her breast through her night dress. There was a man's mouth on her breast!

"I will scream the house down!" she hissed angrily. "I am dressed and I do not care if they see me in my night dress!"

"I, on the other hand, am not," he said coolly. "And if you summon them, I can

guarantee you will not be clothed either by the time they break the door down.”

The first words out of his mouth punched the breath right out of her lungs and took the fight out of her with it. “You’re ... you are not ... You can not be serious!”

“Oh, I am. Deadly,” he murmured, pulling her wrist off of the mattress and guiding her hand until it touched warm, very bare, skin. Curling her hand into a fist, she tried to draw her hand back, but he moved it downward relentlessly. Short, faintly coarse hairs tickled at her fingers. Slipping his hand from her wrist to her hand, he uncurled her fingers and formed her palm around a hard male breast.

She sucked in a sharp breath. “You are ... you are”

“Naked,” he supplied helpfully.

Chapter Seven

“Oh god! Oh my god!” Melantha gasped faintly, struggling to ‘swim’ backwards and out from under him. She gained several inches before her head came into contact with the headboard, effectively cutting off retreat. He crawled up her, dragging the fabric of her night gown with him until it was bunched somewhere in the vicinity of her hips and she could feel hair roughened legs against hers. “I think I am going to faint.”

“I would have to revive you then,” he murmured silkily. “I am certain something would come to me.”

Melantha licked her lips. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“You know why.”

“But I do not know where the blasted papers are!” she said angrily. “I could not give them to you if I wanted to!”

He was silent for a moment. “And you do not want to?”

“I did not say that!”

She could feel him studying her face in the darkness. Whether he could actually make out any of her features, or was merely contemplating dark thoughts, she had no idea.

“You want the diary. I have been thinking about compensation.”

Melantha blinked, her mind instantly leaping to the pathetic amount of money in her account. “Compensation?” she asked warily.

“Mmm. The papers would be worth a good bit, but if they are lost as you claim, I believe I could get a fairly handsome sum for the diary.”

“Sell it, you mean?” Melantha gasped, horrified.

“For publication. It is a bit rough. The writing is almost childish actually, but that lends it a certain ... intriguing aspect. Innocence holds no particular interest to me. It’s actually rather tedious trying to teach a novice the ways to please. But there are plenty of

men who find that particular challenge infinitely exciting. I am sure a publisher would see that right away. And who knows? It could be hugely successful. I should make a deal, I think, that if demand goes above a couple of thousand that I will get a percentage of the sales.”

“Thou ...,” Melantha broke off, squeezing her eyes closed as the image filled her mind of men all over the country reading her diary. Passages that she had written leapt into her mind as vividly as if she was reading it herself at that moment. “How much?” she asked shakily.

“The papers,” he responded promptly, his voice implacable.

“But ... but ... what if I can not find the papers? What if ... something has happened to them?”

“Then you, my dear, have a serious problem,” he said tightly.

She licked her lips, trying to think how much money, exactly, that she had and finally named a sum.

“Do not waste my time,” he growled.

Melantha felt a knot form in her throat. “But ... I do not have anything else!”

He was silent for so long that she thought he must be wrestling with his temper. “But you do.”

“I do?” she asked in surprise, hope threading her voice.

“I found I rather enjoyed our first little encounter and I know you did.”

The breath left her in a rush. “I did no such thing!”

“Liar!” he growled without heat. “Shall I prove it?”

Melantha swallowed audibly. “No,” she said in a suffocated voice.

“There are roughly one hundred fifty pages in your little book. I can be persuaded to trade them.”

Melantha gasped in outrage. “Sell ... myself! For a book! You are mad!”

He shrugged. “Perhaps, otherwise I would simply sell it for the money ... which would be much more useful and is far harder to come by.”

Dismay filled Melantha at that. The truth was he could simply take what he wanted and they both knew that. And she could not help but think that a night of pleasure, however pleasurable it might be, certainly paled in comparison to the sort of money he obviously believed he could get by selling the book.

How was she going to live with herself, though, if she simply allowed a stranger to ... couple with her? Gave him what was meant for the husband she had yearned for for so long? She could not wed if she allowed it. No man would ever forgive her if she married

him and then he discovered that she had given herself to another.

The alternative was no better, though. She had no faith at all that he would simply sell the book and take his money. He wanted the papers. If she made him angry, he would probably avenge himself by telling whoever he sold it to where he had gotten it, and then she would be well and truly ruined. It would not matter if she had never been intimate with a man. No one would believe that she had not.

She licked her dried lips. "If I let ... if I allowed you to do" She broke off again. "How could I trust that you would bring me the book, after ... after."

He chuckled, but the sound was harsh and lacking any real amusement. "Let? You are suggesting that you should lie like a corpse while I pleasure myself? And then, after that truly remarkable experience I would simply hand over the entire book?"

"You need not be so insulting about it!" Melantha snapped. "I do not know how to pleasure you!"

He was silent for several moments. "Exactly my point earlier. This is a waste of time," he murmured, shifting as if he meant to get off of her.

"Wait!" Melantha gasped, feeling as if her last chance was dimming into the distance.

"What if ... I can try. You can tell me what to do and ...and I will try. Then could I have the book?"

He studied her for so long that she thought that he would reject her out of hand. "Pages," he said succinctly.

"What?" she asked blankly.

"I will give you pages for everything you learn. If you are a good pupil, then you will get several pages. Poor performance, maybe a few."

"Pages?" Melantha echoed in dismay. "But ... you said there were a hundred and fifty pages! How many pages?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On how I feel about your performance."

A mixture of indignation and distress filled Melantha. He was not going to allow her to simply endure his touch. He meant to make her participate in her fall from grace. She told him as much, tears clogging her throat.

"That sums it up, yes. If you want to cry into your pillow, later, and tell yourself it was all my doing, then by all means help yourself if you think it will make you feel any better. But weeping and cringing does not appeal to me. You will yield graciously, and with as much enthusiasm as you can muster in that cold little spinster heart of yours, or we have no deal," he said, his voice harsh, angry.

The comment about her spinsterhood was a low blow, and it drove the urge to cry away with a healthy dose of anger and the budding determination to prove him wrong. She was not cold, whatever he might think! She was perfectly normal and she had a perfectly healthy interest in men in a general way. She simply found it difficult to warm to him.

Sniffing, she wracked her brain for another solution. Unfortunately, nothing came to her short of discovering the papers. "But, if I found the papers and gave them to you, you would give me the book? The whole book? And ... and I would not have to do anything else?"

"Do you have them?"

Melantha hesitated. "No," she said mournfully.

He rolled off of her. "Then get up."

She stared up at the shadowy figure for a moment and finally sat up and scooted off of the bed.

"Undress," he said, climbing back onto the bed and stretching out.

A jolt went through Melantha. "Now?" she asked weakly.

He said nothing, merely waited. She sensed tension in him and was not certain whether it was because he more than half expected her to bolt for the door, or from anger. She contemplated making a dash for the door, but only briefly. If she did, he might be caught, and he might not. If he was not, he might just be furious enough with her to take the diary and leave. And sell it.

Biting her lip, she unbuttoned her gown and pulled it off. She had already placed her knee on the bed when he stopped her. "The pantalets too."

Shivering, she untied the ribbon around her waist and allowed them to drop. Stepping out of them, she climbed onto the mattress again and lay down on her back. The bed shifted as he rolled onto his side to face her. She was still wondering if she was to roll to face him when she felt his palm settle on her shoulder. Heat instantly traveled from his palm into her skin, sending a shiver through her. She swallowed, the sound loud in her ears. "How much for tonight?" she asked shakily.

Amusement and irritation threaded his voice. "You are a merchant at heart, are you not? But then I suppose all women are."

Anger flickered in her, chasing the chill from her blood. "You suggested the arrangement," she reminded him.

"So I did. The loose pages," he added after a moment's thought, almost absently as if his mind was fully occupied elsewhere. "If you learn the lesson well."

Melantha was still trying to remember how many pages she had written and tucked into the book when she felt his hand glide from her shoulder to her neck. The simple

movement made her skin prickle and come to attention, lifting the fine down all over her body so that her skin felt alert and exquisitely aware of the faintest of currents of air.

She tensed in spite of all she could do when his hand coasted downward. Ignoring it, he examined her collar bone and the upper slope of her breasts. Her nipples, which had puckered and stood erect the moment his hand began to move over her, seemed to grow tighter and tighter the nearer he came to them, as if begging for his touch. He brushed one, stirring heated currents in her breast and belly. Instead of teasing it with his touch, as she had more than half hoped he would, he skirted it, cupping the breast instead in his palm, squeezing it gently.

The prickles on her skin tightened, becoming even more aware. Her breath snagged in her throat, forming a tightness that squeezed her air passage, limiting the air she could drag into her lungs. Her mouth went dry as she compensated by breathing through her mouth.

It dawned on her as he moved to her other breast and cupped it, massaging it as he had the first that she was lying stiff as a poker, that she had done nothing as he had so nastily pointed out, beyond lying like a dead thing while he explored. "What am I supposed to do?" she asked on a shaky whisper.

He paused. Amusement and irritation threaded his voice when he spoke. "Nothing for the moment." He seemed to think it over. "Think only about what I am doing. You will do this next."

Melantha's eyes widened as an image filled her mind of her touching him as he was touching her. She grew abruptly tenser. As if he felt the sudden increase in tension, he leaned down, covering the tip of the breast he was not massaging with mouth, plucking at the opposite nipple with his thumb and forefinger. Melantha felt her body respond instantly to the heat of his mouth, felt something jerk tight in her belly. Warmth flowed into her from his mouth, spread through her, easing the tension of nervousness in her body and arms, her neck and legs, and centering tension more strongly in her lower belly. She made a little gasping sound as he suckled the sensitive tip, curling his tongue tightly around it and drawing on it with his mouth, her mind focusing of its own accord on the two points he teased with his mouth and his fingers. Blood rushed into her breasts more forcefully, heightening her reception of sensation. Dizziness began to cloud her mind, but it only seemed to concentrate more fully on sensation as her thoughts grew disjointed and confused.

A heaviness seemed to settle over her. Her breath grew shorter, more difficult. Her quim began to tighten and relax, almost like an echo of the motion of his hand on her breast. She grew warmer there, in her woman's place, and then moist.

Disappointment filled her when he lifted his head at last, but he merely exchanged breasts, moving his mouth to the one he had been teasing with his fingers, catching her other breasts in his hand and tweaking that nipple.

As she sank deeper and deeper into a whirlpool of pleasurable sensation, she became dimly aware that his breathing was almost as ragged as her own, that faint tremors went through his body as they did through hers. The awareness sent a fiery wave of heat through her, stealing her breath so that she found herself panting for short gasps of air. The pleasure grew so intense she found that she could not remain still. Aching all over, feeling as if her skin was on fire, she shifted beneath him, moving restlessly.

Without any awareness of having moved at all, she felt the cool silkiness of his hair beneath her palms and fingertips, felt the curve of his skull. A war erupted inside of her, the certainty that she had reached a point where she could not bear any more, and the equal certainty that she would die if he stopped. Her palms tightened on his head, willing him to do more, to give her surcease from the endless, mounting pleasure that was quickly becoming more torment than gratification.

Releasing her nipple, he moved lower, brushing his lips along the skin just beneath her breasts. She gasped as her skin tightened painfully, her fingers tangling tightly in his hair. Ignoring her resistance, he moved lower, exploring her body thoroughly from her breasts to her waist with his lips and the teasing brush of his tongue.

When he reached her belly, she dragged her hands from his hair and gripped the sheets, curling her hands like claws into the bedding, fighting the urge to lift to meet his touch and loosing the battle. Her hips curled, rose to meet him each time he lifted slightly away from her to find another patch of skin to tease with the gentle suction of his mouth. He hesitated for several long moments when he reached the curling thatch of hair that covered her mound. Goose bumps rose all over her as she felt the heat of his breath teasing the lips of her sex. She tensed all over, waiting, torn between a screaming need for him to explore further and an incomprehensible fear that he would.

After a prolonged moment, he leaned down and nipped at the flesh at the apex of her thighs. Her body seized painfully at the excruciatingly keen sensation that ripped through her. She gasped, struggled to draw breath.

He lifted his head, studied her for a long, long moment and finally pulled away from her, sprawling on his back.

For several moments after he had withdrawn, Melantha was in a state of shock, disbelieving, confused. Slowly, it filtered through her heat drugged mind that he was waiting.

A mixture of doubt and anxious anticipation filled her. She rolled onto her side after the briefest of hesitations, however, and reached to lay her hand hesitantly on his chest. The hair roughened flesh teased her palm, enticed her to examine the differences in their bodies. Shifting closer abruptly, she glided her hand down the length of his body until she felt the hard edge of his hip bone. Beneath her palm, she felt his skin ripple, the muscles flexing. Patches of silky smooth skin gave way to hair roughened skin as she moved her hand up his body again.

Were his nipples as sensitive as her own, she wondered as she discovered a tiny replica of her own nestled in the hair that seemed to cover his chest from his breasts to his belly.

She wanted to explore his sex, but he had not explored hers. Reluctantly dismissing the urge, she stroked her hands over him, exploring the breadth of his hard, unyielding chest, feeling her own body respond to her exploration with almost as much excitement as she had felt when he was touching her. Warming to her task, she teased one nipple with her fingers and leaned close to cover the other tiny bud with her mouth.

She felt him tense beneath her touch. Uncertain of whether that meant he had liked it or not, she moved away after a few moments. Her breasts dragged across his hair roughened chest as she leaned over him to tease his other nipple, sending hard waves of excitement through her. Entranced, she moved closer as she explored him with her mouth and tongue, nipping at him, luxuriating in the sharp twinges of pleasure that shot through her as her sensitive nipples brushed against him.

His breath became more and more ragged. She could feel his heart beneath her palms, beating as frantically as her own.

Caught up in her exploration within a very few moments, she examined his neck and arms with her lips and fingertips, as well as his chest and moved lower, exploring his torso with equal curiosity. The first brush of her hand against his cock was accidental, but she knew instantly what it was, the man root that she had never been able to really picture in her mind. Her fingers moved over it hesitantly, exploring the shape and length of it. The skin, stretched tightly around his engorged member, was surprisingly silky to the touch.

It moved against her hand.

Startled, she jerked her hand away, but after a moment, she returned to explore it more fully, curling her hand around it. Her eyes grew wider and wider as she examined it from root to tip. It felt huge. Mentally, her mind leapt from his cock to her body and performed a rapid calculation. It felt like it was longer than she was from waist to ... crotch, and moreover it was so thick she could scarcely wrap her hand around it. She swallowed, feeling doubt quash her excitement of a moment before. "It will not fit," she muttered beneath her breath.

"It will," he said, his voice harsh.

Melantha glanced at his face ... or where his face should be, feeling embarrassment heat her face. An image of Rupert slamming a rain swollen door that no longer fit the frame arose in her mind, ramming his shoulder against it and finally pounding on it with his fists until, by main strength, he managed to force it into the opening. She released him abruptly. She did not doubt for a moment that he could make it fit. She was fairly certain, though, that she did not want him to.

She moved away from him, curling into a tight protective ball. Mother of god! She had

seen stallions that had little more than that! “It won’t,” she said emphatically.

“Virgins!” he growled irritably, spitting the word out like a curse as he sat up jerkily.

“Your body is designed to accommodate a man’s body.”

She was not an idiot! She knew that. Obviously, all men were not the same, though. She informed him of as much.

“They are,” he growled. “Roughly,” he amended after a moment.

“Exactly! And I am roughly the same as every other woman, except taller than most, and I still say it will not fit!”

He got off the bed. She heard him moving around the room and listened keenly, trying to decide whether he was getting dressed or not. A pang smote her at that thought. He was going to go and take that blasted twice damned diary with him!

She heard the rustle of papers. He dropped something on the bed. Without another word, he turned and headed toward the window. Melantha felt around until her hands touched paper.

He had brought them with him! The cad! He had fully intended this all the time, to bargain with her for her diary! And he had pretended he had only thought of it as an alternative!

“Next time--have the papers for me,” he growled as he slung one leg out of the window and abruptly disappeared.

“Bastard!” she growled when she was certain he was out of hearing range. Her chin wobbled. Abruptly, she crumpled the papers in her hands into a hard ball and threw it across the room. Her heart nearly failed her, though, when the ball hit the drapes and landed on the floor.

Scrambling from the bed, she scurried toward the mantel and took down a box of Lucifers, striking one and holding it to the candle wick. “Low down snake!” she muttered, grabbing the wad of paper and opening it to examine the paper when it occurred to her that he was just low enough to barter for nothing more than blank paper.

Feeling slightly mollified, and greatly disturbed for no apparent reason when she saw it was indeed the pages she had written on, she counted them, trying to remember just how many pages there had been and finally set the candle down and began to shred the paper until it was nothing more than tiny slivers. She did not realize that she was crying until she began to scramble along the floor to retrieve the pieces and discovered her eyes were blurring until she could hardly make them out.

Piling the pieces in the fireplace, she used the candle to set fire to them.

She did not think of the fact that she was sitting naked on the floor until a shiver skated through her.

Her body, she realized dully, was still aching and throbbing from his touch, just as it had that first time, tormenting her for relief she had no idea how to give it. She suspected, though, that he knew, that he had known exactly what he was doing, and how she would feel when he stopped.

Sniffing, she mopped her eyes and got up, dragging her night clothes on again before she climbed into the bed. The sheets, she discovered, were still faintly warm from his body. When she inhaled deeply, she could just detect the vaguest trace of his scent on the pillow next to her. Without knowing why, she dragged it closer, hugging it against her chest and yielding to the tears clogging her throat, weeping until she was so exhausted she began to drift to sleep.

It dawned on her just as she slipped over the edge, though, why she was crying. She had not caressed him because of the damned diary. She had touched him because she had wanted to ... so badly she still ached with the need.

And then he had paid her as if it had meant nothing at all to him beyond a ... a transaction!

* * * *

It was nothing short of amazing, Melantha thought as she lay staring blindly at her bed chamber ceiling in the darkness how suddenly disaster could strike, so quickly it left one reeling, confused, unable to cope with the smallest things. She had chafed against the bonds of propriety that had seemed to be slowly strangling the life from her, wished for anything but the life she had and she had sought the only escape open to her. Pouring out her secret desires on the pages of her diary because, even though she could escape in her dreams it had ceased to be enough. She had reached a point where she needed to breathe life into her creation, her night time lover.

And now she had a stranger in her bed, determined to bring her fantasies from the pages of her diary into reality, into the excruciatingly boring existence she had hated and wished to escape, and she was a bundle of nerves.

It did not take much soul searching to realize that a good deal of her distress was because of the things the stranger had done--and not done. He had aroused feelings in her that she did not know how to deal with, left her with the sense that she had missed something crucial. She had been so tense and achy and miserable since that first night that she could scarcely focus on anything beyond the torment of her own body.

As hard as she tried to convince herself that she lay wakeful now from terror, even she did not believe it. There was certainly fear involved in her restlessness, but it was not only because the stranger unnerved her so. It was not only because she knew he represented a very real threat to her even if he did not expose her.

It was at least partly because she was afraid of herself, unnerved by the way she was sinking beneath the spell he had woven around her.

A part of her nervousness was because, in the back of her mind, she was afraid that she was looking forward to ‘earning’ back the damning pages of her diary far more than she should.

Giving up finally on sleep, she had climbed out of the bed and moved to the window, curling up on the window seat and staring down at the darkened yard below. She had been peering into the dark shadows for a time before she acknowledged to herself that she was watching for him.

She had not lit a fire. It was warm yet, even for fall, and in any case she preferred her room cooler. Generally, she slept better if it was cool in the room.

It felt stuffy, though, and after a few moments, she unlatched the window and opened it a little. The cool air felt soothing on her heated skin.

Melantha had just registered the sensation of being watched, of no longer being alone, when she heard with dread, the voice.

“Waiting for me?” he drawled.

Chapter Eight

Melantha nearly jumped out of her skin. Two seconds warning was simply not enough foreknowledge to prepare herself. For a split second more as she whirled toward the sound of his voice, trying to pierce the darkness, she sat frozen, her mind scrambling madly to account for his presence when she knew very well she had locked the door.

Had she been so caught up in staring out the window that she had failed to hear a key in the lock?

Or had he been in the room the entire time?

“If you take one more step,” she warned him between lips that seemed stiff and completely uncoordinated, “I will scream the house down.”

He took another step.

She licked her dry lips. “I mean it!”

“You do not mind being found in your room with a man?” he asked coolly.

She hesitated, fighting the image that rose in her mind at his prompting, of everyone pouring into her room the moment she began to scream, Rupert’s cronies leering at her in her ragged old night gown.

It would almost not have been as bad if she had not been so acutely conscious of the fact that the gown was threadbare and virtually transparent.

His arms shot out. He seized her by her shoulders, dragging her off the window seat and up against his hard length.

“I thought not,” he murmured, satisfaction threading his voice.

“Why are you here?” she asked, breathless with dread and almost equally breathless with something uncomfortably close to excitement.

“You have something I want,” he said, his voice low, resonating with some emotion she could not entirely identify.

She gasped, outraged at the ‘something’ that immediately leapt to mind. “How dare you!”

Amusement threaded his voice. “Besides that,” he murmured.

The amusement angered her and she began pushing against him abruptly, struggling to free herself.

“All right,” he conceded, tremors running through him now that she strongly suspected was laughter he was trying to contain. “If you insist, but then we must discuss why I came.”

Melantha ground her teeth. “That is a vile, disgusting insinuation,” she snapped when she discovered that she could not free herself from his grip. “I would die before I allowed you to touch me!”

She had no sooner gotten the threat out than her mind leapt to the night before when he had touched her with his mouth until she had been ready to beg him to touch her more. The cad knew it, too!

“You did not seem averse to my touch last night,” he murmured, his tone thoughtful. “I seem to recall some sighing, and a few moans, but obviously it was not fatal. And, considering some of the things I read in your diary, I doubt very much that I could think of anything to do that would either shock or horrify you. It beggars the imagination--mine, at least.”

A shockwave traveled through Melantha that he had brazenly admitted not only taking her diary, but reading it! “You ... you cad! You low down snake!” she ground out, wishing she had listened to Rupert curse more so that she could recall something worse to call him. “That diary is not even mine! I found it here when we moved in!” she lied, feeling satisfaction fill her as she uttered it and wondering why she had not thought before to deny that it was hers.

His amusement vanished so quickly that she was stunned, and more shocked and thoroughly unnerved and baffled by the rage that almost instantaneously took its place. He released her as suddenly as he had seized her. Before she could do more than sway at the abrupt cessation of support, he twisted one hand into the hair at the nape of her neck, dragging her head back until her lips parted from the pressure and her body arched into his. Grasping her buttocks with his other hand, he held her tightly, grinding his swollen member against her mound almost brusingly even as his mouth descended, covering her mouth, absorbing the gasp of surprise she uttered.

Dizziness assailed her as the moist heat of his mouth connected with hers in a fierce

assault to her senses. With her first gasping breath, she inhaled the scent of his skin and shaving soap, and a light, pleasantly woodsy sort of smell. And when he thrust his tongue into her mouth, boldly, demandingly raking it along hers, she tasted him, a light mingling of flavors that sent a heady rush through her; a touch of brandy, and something pungent but oddly pleasing and beneath that a taste that was his alone. His hot breath mingled with hers. His scent and taste--of man, of things forbidden and infinitely desirable--invaded her, poured through her veins like liquid fire, intoxicating, enervating, shattering thoughts before they could fully form.

Taken completely off guard, she had no defense, was so stunned that he had sundered her will even before it occurred to her, dimly, to struggle against the numbing, fiery tide she found herself drowning in. Discovering her arms were trapped between them, she curled her fingers into the lapels of his jacket in an instinctive attempt to keep herself from falling as she lost control of her equilibrium.

He was breathing raggedly when he dragged his mouth from hers, releasing her so suddenly that she had to lock her knees to keep from falling to the floor. "And this does not seem even vaguely familiar to you?" he rasped hoarsely.

As dizzy and disoriented as she was, the fury in his voice penetrated the heated fog of her mind far more quickly than the words. When the words coalesced, however, her own anger surged forward. "You bastard!" she snarled, swinging at him.

He had expected it. Ducking even as she threw herself off balance, he put his shoulder against her middle, clamped one arm beneath her buttocks and stood up. She gasped as she fell over his shoulder, so stunned he had carried her to the bed and tossed her toward the mattress before she could react with more than a sound that was half outrage and half fear. She landed with a bounce that knocked the fight out of her. Before she could gather her wits, he sprawled on top of her. Grasping her wrists, he pinned them to the bed on either side of her head. "You"

He cut her off, clamping his mouth brusquely over hers.

Her anger worked against her. The passionate outburst left her wide open to the drugging heat and hunger of his mouth. She sank like a rock beneath the onslaught. The fiery pool that he had created inside of her moments before rose up to meet the new molten tide. She went limp beneath him, tangling her tongue with his, sucking it hungrily as her body responded to his with a will of its own.

She was the next thing to comatose when he lifted his head at last, mindless, caught up in a rip tide she had no desire to fight, chasing the promise it offered of exquisite surcease.

He was breathing as raggedly as she was as he stared down at her. "If those were not your thoughts or feelings recorded on those pages you would not be feeling what you are feeling now. You would be fainting from fear and disgust, not desire. I would have had more respect for you if you had admitted your failings instead of laying the deed at the

feet of a lady who never did you any harm. A woman who was a lady in every sense of the word and not just by accident of birth,” he said angrily, shoving away from her abruptly and rolling off the bed.

A chill went through Melantha as he left her. Her chaotic mind struggled with the angry words he had slung at her. Slowly at first, and then far more quickly as her desire collapsed like a burst balloon, she caught the gist of it and felt a surge of outrage. He had said she was no lady!

Struggling upright, she spied him stalking toward the window. “You cad! Thief! Rogue! You sir, are no gentleman! You would not know a lady if she slapped your smug, self-righteous face!”

He ignored her, stalking toward the window.

Uttering a growl of impotent rage, she looked around for something to throw at him. The pillows were the only thing close enough to hand and she grabbed them, throwing them at his head as hard as she could sling them. They fell short, since he had nearly reached the window by that time, and she screamed in pure rage, and then again, ear splittingly. “Help! Help me! There’s someone in my room!”

He froze and looked back at her for a split second before he disappeared abruptly through the window. Rolling from the bed, Melantha raced to the door, sprawling out when she grabbed the knob and yanked and the door remained closed.

Something hard smacked into the door on the other side. “Mel! Open the damned door!”

Scrambling to her feet, she grabbed at the key and turned it in the lock. Rupert nearly bowled her over when he crashed through the door just as she turned the knob to let him in.

“What the hell?”

“A man!” Melantha screamed, pointing toward the window. “A man!”

An avalanche of men fell through her door. In their wake flowed the distinct odor of tobacco smoke and strong liquor, making it immediately apparent, even if not for the fact that they were fully clothed, that she had not wakened anyone.

After gaping at the crowd of men illuminated by the light spilling in from the hallway, most of whom had discarded their vests, jackets and cravats, Melantha collected herself, dashed to her armoire, and grabbed a dressing gown, thrusting her arms into it and securing it at the waist with the belt. When she turned, she saw that Rupert was leaning out the window staring down at the grounds. Three of his guests were crowded behind him, trying to peer over his shoulder.

Sir Knightly entered the room, looked around curiously and sauntered toward the candle stick he spied on her vanity. Lighting it, he propped a hip on her desk and looked her over appreciatively.

Reddening, Melantha glanced toward the door. Lord Blackthorne was leaning against the wall across the hallway, a full tumbler in one hand, his expression midway between boredom and irritation. Taking a long drought of the liquid, he met her gaze as he lowered the glass and lifted one dark brow sardonically.

“There’s no one down there!” Rupert said with disgust. “Damn it to hell, Mel! Must you shriek like that only because you have had a bad dream!”

Melantha gaped at him. “It was not a bad dream, Rupert! There was someone in my room!”

“Goodness! What is all the fuss about!” Grandmother exclaimed, tottering in at the door, one hand clutched to her heart.

“Mel had a bad dream!”

“It was no such thing, Rupert! We had a burglar, Grandmother!”

“OH! Oh, I fear I shall faint!” Grandmother exclaimed weakly.

“Don’t!” Rupert and Melantha both exclaimed at once, running into each other as they raced to the old woman.

“Now see what you’ve done!” Rupert snapped angrily, slipping his arm beneath his grandmother’s arm and escorting her from the room. “You’ve upset her. You know she has a bad heart!”

Melantha glared at his back as he walked their grandmother out, guiding her wobbling steps back toward her room and assuring her that it was nothing at all. Feeling hideously guilty as she watched them, she met Lord Blackthorne’s gaze briefly, and then looked away, glancing uncomfortably at the men still milling about her room. Mr. Markam and Sir Johns exchanged a glance.

“I believe I will just take a stroll around the grounds and see if I see anything,” Lord Cleeves murmured, excusing himself.

Melantha sent him a look of gratitude, though she felt like he had dismissed her claim just as Rupert had.

“We’ll go with you,” Mr. Markam said, and Sir Johns followed him.

“Are you all right?” Sir Knightly asked.

Melantha’s chin wobbled at the sympathy in his voice. Swallowing with an effort, she nodded.

“You’re certain?”

She sniffed. “Yes,” she managed to say.

He pushed away from the vanity. Moving to the window, he closed and latched it, checking to make certain it was securely locked. “If you need anything, call.”

Nodding again, Melantha followed him to the door, locking it behind him.

Leaning against the door when she had locked it, she covered her face with her hands, wondering if her grandmother was all right and if she really had upset her. As tempted as she was to go check on her, however, she knew Grandmother was probably in heaven with her 'dear Rupert' fussing over her. And if she went and he was still there, he would only fuss at her.

She supposed she deserved it for causing such a scene, particularly when she was not frightened but purely furious.

She could scarcely credit the anger the man aroused in her with the least provocation. Not but what he had been thoroughly infuriating! But she was not prone to lose her temper. She never had been before, at any rate, and certainly not to the point that she was screaming and throwing things.

Emotionally expended, she dropped her hands, realizing that she would never get to sleep for worrying that she had seriously distressed her grandmother and imagining her on her deathbed. Opening her door after a moment, she peered around to make certain no one was about and trudged down the hallway to her grandmother's room to take her medicine and apologize for disturbing the house.

She had not expected that she actually would have to take her medicine, but she found once she reached her grandmother's room that not only was Rupert still there, but her grandmother was still having vapors. She did not want to take the laudanum, but she found she could not come out the victor in a battle of wills when it was one against two very determined individuals.

She took the revolting stuff and trudged back to her room, more indignant than when she had left, and feeling the strange effects of the 'sleeping draught' even before she managed to make it to her room.

Reflecting that she would at least get a decent night's sleep out of it, she climbed into bed, drawing the covers up beneath her chin and lay down to allow the laudanum to take her far from her troubles.

Her lover was binding her wrists when she drifted toward awareness. She sighed softly, feeling anticipation instantly warm her body.

It took a tremendous effort to lift her eyelids and even when she had she could not focus. The room was dark. She could see nothing more than a darker shadow hovering over her with a backdrop of lighter shadows nearer the window. Puzzlement settled over her when she realized she was still wearing her nightgown and her pantalets. She was usually naked in her dreams.

She forgot all about the little inconsistencies, however, when he leaned down to kiss her. The taste of strong spirits lingered on his tongue, another deviation from her usual dreams, but it was not at all unpleasant and, in any case, the feel of his hot mouth on

hers sent such a wave of intense yearning through her that it banished all thought from her mind. She made a sound of pleasure deep in her throat, welcoming the thrust and rake of his tongue along hers. Her breath hitched in her throat and became more rapid as her heart rate accelerated with excitement, partly from the sensations roiling within her and partly because she sensed rising arousal in him in his quickened breath and the hunger of his mouth on hers.

She was panting for breath when he broke the kiss, sucked at her lips and then dragged his lips down her throat until he met the neck of her gown. Grasping the front, he tugged at it until the closure separated in a shower of flying buttons. Surprise filtered through her briefly, but vanished beneath a wave of intoxicating heat as he found her breasts, cupping one in his hand while he suckled the turgid tip of her other breast, driving her into mindless bliss.

She wanted to hold him to her and at the same time felt a desperation for him to fondle her other breast as he had the first. As if he read her mind, he released his hold on the nipple he had been teasing her to distraction with and dragged hot kisses down one slope and up the next. She gasped when the heat of his mouth closed over the engorged tip, panting for breath, straining against the bindings on her wrists.

As if the increasing desperation of her writhing body and panting breaths drove him beyond control, he broke away from her breast and moved lower, sucking little kisses along her flesh, nipping at it. The faint sound of rending cloth was followed by more kisses as he moved lower still, lathing her belly with his tongue, dipping into the faint hollow of her belly button.

With obvious impatience, he tugged at the tie of her pantalets, snapped it, dragging them from her hips and down her legs. Cool air brushed her legs and belly, lifting her briefly from the heated fog that surrounded her. In the next moment, the miasma enveloped her again as he explored her lower belly and then parted abruptly as she felt his fingers part her nether lips.

The rake of his tongue knocked the breath out of her, the sensation so sharp, so exquisitely keen that she tried to evade his touch, certain she could not bear it.

“You have not done that before,” she whispered.

He lifted his head to stare up at her. She felt the movement, felt his gaze on her.

“Good,” he growled. “It’s always nice to be first at something.”

She was still puzzling over that peculiar comment when she felt him tie something around her thigh, just above the knee. Rising, he tugged her leg up and tied it near her wrists. Jerking a piece from her ruined night gown, he bound the other leg.

Cool air licked along her cleft as he bound her up. She felt the moist lips of her sex parting with the pressure.

Before she could even begin to wonder why he had done something he had never done

before, he settled again. This time she discovered she could not wiggle away from the heat of his mouth and tongue. An avalanche of fiery sensation jolted through her when he covered her nether lips and kissed it with the same rapacious hunger than he had kissed her mouth. She gasped sharply, bucked, struggled. Relentlessly, he sucked and licked at a tiny nub of flesh at the jointure of her nether lips until she could not catch her breath at all. The muscles within her lower belly clenched and unclenched almost painfully, dragging little cries from her she was scarcely aware of. As if the cries had driven him mad, he fed more ravenously on her flesh until, abruptly, her entire body seized, arching, and then pounding waves of the most exquisite ecstasy poured through her in waves like liquid fire. She gasped in sharply, the sound skating the edge of a scream as wave after wave jolted her.

She had not even ceased to convulse when he lifted his head, shifting upward over her body. She felt something hard and rounded probing her cleft, pushing into her sex. Her quim objected, tightening against the intrusion. She heard him grinding his teeth as he drove into her with relentless pressure, slowly sinking deeper and deeper.

Dragging in a desperate breath after a moment, he ceased to push, allowed his flesh to ease slightly out again, and then arched his hips, driving into her again. This time he struck a barrier, but he only ground his teeth and pushed harder. It gave abruptly with a tearing pain that drew a choked cry from her, penetrated the euphoria that had enveloped her.

He found her mouth, covering it with his own as he withdrew slightly and pushed again, deeper, delving steadily deeper until he could go no further, until Melantha was struggling to wrench her mouth from his, struggling to catch her breath. A shudder went through him. Breaking the kiss, he burrowed his face along her neck and began to move rhythmically in and out, stroking his hard flesh along the channel of her sex as he pumped into her, blinded by the need that had seized him to anything but the pursuit of his own bliss. Wrapping his arms tightly around her, he increased the tempo of his strokes as her body slowly adjusted to his, as the moisture coating her passage eased his movements.

And as the burning eased inside of her, Melantha felt her body responding with pleasure, felt the building of tension inside of her that she had experienced only moments before. She gasped, reaching for it as he began to thrust faster still until he was pounding against her. For a moment, the strain against her arms and legs distracted her, but then faded to nothingness as she felt a blossoming within her, felt her body lifting toward another rapturous seizure.

He let out a hoarse groan, his body seizing as hers had and her body responded by erupting harder than before, so hard that blackness welled up around her and then consumed her.

* * * *

Ransom woke with a start only the sense of extreme danger penetrating sleep and far too much alcohol could produce. His brain was still so fogged with the aftermath of pleasure, and too much brandy, however, that he was completely disoriented for many moments, trying to figure out how he had come to be lying face down on a woman.

The body beneath his was definitely a woman, though, and from the sounds, she was sleeping far more deeply even than he had been.

Recalling vaguely the soft moans and keening cries she had made as he plundered her body, he wondered why he felt the sense of alarm, and beyond that an uncomfortable sense of guilt.

Rolling off the woman at last, he blinked his eyes and focused them with an effort.

The sight that greeted him sent a damned unpleasant shockwave through him.

Melantha was tied to the bed, and not spread eagle, her night gown hanging off of her in shreds.

Her sex glistened with his seed, promptly arousing him.

“Oh god,” he groaned, dropping his face against the mattress and trying to jog his mind for details he was fairly sure he did not really want to recall, let alone examine closely.

He had been in a rage when he left. He recalled that quiet clearly--the rage, because she had insinuated the diary he had found was his mother's. He knew damned well it wasn't--if for no other reason besides the fact that the little twit had signed her name to it, and written every word in the same hand. He didn't know why it had so thoroughly enraged him except that it had instantly resurrected the only clear memory he had of his mother--dying in agony.

He had left with the laudable intention of blowing off steam and mellowing out with a stiff drink. He had not really ‘mellowed’, however, he recalled. He had merely spent his time brooding over the chit. More precisely, he'd thought about the things she had written in her diary, the way she had responded to him when he had kissed her, and the fact that he wanted her so bad he could taste it and could not think about any damned thing else.

As much as he hated to admit it, he hadn't thought up that ‘bargain’ he had struck with her because he wanted the papers. He had thought it up because he wanted her.

And when he'd finished drinking himself into a stupor, he'd gone after her.

Pushing himself up abruptly, he carefully unbound her--which was when it dawned on him that she wasn't just sleeping. She was out. Cold.

He couldn't smell anything on her breath but himself, but he had a feeling she'd had a good dose of laudanum and the realization struck him with a mixture of feelings that were no more pleasant than the ones he'd had previously.

No wonder she'd thought he was her other lover!

Arranging her more comfortably on the bed, he pulled the covers over her, felt around for his clothing and left. It wasn't until he got to his own room that he made the worst discovery of his life.

He had blood on his cock, and it wasn't his. After staring at it in shock for a full ten minutes, the thing that had been nagging at him that he had been so assiduously trying to avoid refused to be ignored any longer. She hadn't just been tight, she'd been totally untried.

He'd just deflowered a virgin.

"Christ!"

Chapter Nine

Neither exhaustion nor the dose of laudanum her grandmother had insisted on giving her had prevented dreams. Melantha had spent much of the night reliving the events and woke feeling as achy and distressed as she had been the night before, and, she strongly suspected, for the same reasons. Reality, she had discovered, was a far cry from the tame fantasies she had had before. The man had made her feel things she had never imagined she could feel, spawned dreams that had wracked her with such longing and ecstasy that she shuddered and quaked with echoes of those sensations each time she thought about them.

As infuriating and insulting and, yes, scary, as the man was who crept into her room at night, his touch and his kisses affected her in a way she would never have believed possible.

Still too exhausted to gather the strength to get up, she lay staring at the ceiling above her bed for a time, going back over what had happened.

One thing became clear immediately.

When she had screamed, all of Rupert's guests had come. So, either he moved faster than she thought possible for any human being, or he was a complete stranger. She supposed she was not particularly surprised, because she had found it difficult to reconcile the man in her room with any of Rupert's guests, but she found it very distressing since it meant that a search of the house was not going to produce the diary.

As depressing as that thought was, it was almost a relief in a way. As long as she had had doubts about the men in the manor, she had felt compelled to risk searching their quarters for the casket and there was no longer any point in doing so.

Reluctantly, she returned to the encounter itself. If he was a stranger, and she thought he was, it seemed doubtful that she was going to uncover a clue about his identity.

He was a big man, incredibly strong, and amazingly quick for someone of his size. What, she wondered, could she make of that beyond the fact that she was helpless to

prevent him from doing whatever he took the notion to do?

Obviously, screaming for help was not going to make the least difference. For not only had they not caught him, they had all behaved as if she was a lunatic. Worse, as if she was a lonely spinster who desperately wanted attention.

Damn Rupert's hide! If it was not just like him to dismiss her as being of no consequence at all! Up until he had accused her of being hysterical only because she had had a bad dream, she was certain the men with him had realized that there was a real threat. From the very moment he had planted that notion in their heads, they had all begun to look at her with irritation, embarrassment, pity.

It occurred to her after a few moments that what distressed her most about the night before was the anger the stranger had displayed toward her. He had behaved as if she had insulted him personally, but he had not really seemed particularly disturbed until she had lied about the diary.

She sat up in bed at that. He must have known the woman, she thought, feeling a thread of excitement.

After examining that idea, she frowned. She did not know much about the family that had owned the house before, but she had gotten the impression from something that Rupert had told her and her grandmother that all of them had died. He had won the place in a wager from the last owner.

A distant relative? That would fit the fact that she was almost positive that the man was gently bred, even if he was no gentleman. She supposed that it might also explain why he had gotten so angry about the unintentional insult to the woman who had lived here before, but it seemed a little farfetched that he would be so angry about a distant relative.

Maybe she was looking at it the wrong way? Maybe he had been angry because she was trying to wiggle out from under the strongest thing he had to use for blackmail? Maybe the anger was not really because of the diary, but because he saw his hold on her slipping and became furious that it would make it more difficult to get those papers?

And what were the papers? What good would it do him to have them?

Briefly, she wondered if finding them would give her leverage with him, but she shuddered at the thought of even considering such a thing. He had been very angry the night before. She did not think he was the sort of man that anyone tested who had a grain of sense.

Dismissing it for the moment, she shoved the cover back--and froze.

Shock held her for so long that not a single thought passed through her mind. Slowly, it dawned on her that the erotic dream she had had the night before had not just seemed more real than anything she had had before. It was real!

All of it! Her gown was shredded, her pantalets missing. Bruises were already showing

on her wrists and thighs.

And there was blood and something she had not seen before dried on her thighs, making it impossible to assure herself that she had merely begun her menses--early, because it was not time for her cycle.

“Oh god! Oh my god!” she whispered. He had ... he had ... She could not even finish the thought in her mind.

Abruptly, she surged from the bed, stripped off the torn night gown, gathered up all the other evidence of her disgrace and looked wildly around for a place to hide it. She had already stuffed the tattered clothing in her armoire and then under her mattress and snatched it out again before she realized there was no place she could hide it that it would not be found.

Tossing the articles of torn clothing into the fireplace, she set fire to it. Almost instantly, the smell of burning clothing began to fill the room and she rushed to the window and opened it without even considering that she did not have a stitch of clothing on. She was, in fact, in too great a state of shock to realize it at all until much, much later.

Neither was her mind on her state of disgrace, for she could not face that at the moment. The only thing driving her was the primal need to survive and the certainty that she would not survive long if what she had done was discovered by either her brother or her grandmother, for they would pitch her into the street.

When she had opened the window to air the room, therefore, she dashed to the bed and examined it carefully for any stains that might incriminate her. Feeling vaguely relieved when she saw nothing, she plopped down on the bed again, simply staring into space for an endless time, feeling pretty much nothing.

Prompted after a time by that same sense of self-preservation, she got up and cleaned herself up and went to the armoire to search for something to wear.

She did not have to worry about the bruises on her thighs, but she needed something to cover her wrists and she chose an old dress that had long sleeves with ruffles at the wrists. It was horribly outdated, but she did not have fashion on her mind at the moment.

When she had managed to struggle into it and fasten it, she combed her hair and arranged it. Struggling for a poise she did not feel, she went downstairs, hoping against hope that Rupert and all of his guests were gone hunting--gone anywhere so that she did not have to face any of them.

“That was a disgraceful display last evening!” Grandmother greeted her when she finally made it into the breakfast parlor.

Melantha paused in the act of helping her plate feeling the color leave her face. Realizing after a moment that the comment referred to her ‘hysterics’ from her ‘bad dream’, she sent her grandmother a resentful glance. “Next time I will remember that I must endure death and/or ravishment quietly so as not to disturb the household.”

"I am not in the mood for any of your sarcasm, young lady!" Grandmother retorted. "I had palpitations all night!"

She dimly recalled that she had, too, and felt a wash of color return to her cheeks. Guilt joined the resentment in her breast, but resentment won out. "I had a few palpitations myself," she muttered.

"And that is not the point anyway. What possessed you to summon the household when you were indecent?"

Melantha turned to look at her grandmother with her mouth at half mast. "Should I have asked the burglar to pass me my dressing gown before I screamed?"

Grandmother glared at her. "You are not too old for me to take a cane to you if you can not speak to me with respect!"

"I beg your pardon, Grandmother," Melantha managed to say stiffly. "I am not quite sure what it was that I did wrong, however. There was a man in my room. Should I only cry for help if I am decently dressed when I am attacked?"

Grandmother looked at her sharply. "You said nothing about being attacked. You said there was a man in your room."

Melantha felt her cheeks flame, and then the blood drained almost as quickly as she realized that she had a guilty secret she had no desire for her grandmother to get wind of. "Hypothetically."

Grandmother frowned at her. "What?"

"I meant if a man attacked me," she mumbled.

Grandmother was silent until she had finished helping her plate and taken her place at the table. "I realize that dreams can be very distressing, but they are not real and you have not done this in years. And I am far too old to try to deal with hysterics now when you are old enough to have enough perspective and self control not to behave as if you can not tell the difference."

Melantha stared at her plate, but realized there was no point in trying to explain to her grandmother, again, that it had been real, that she had not woken from one of the night terrors that had plagued her as a child and young girl, particularly after her parents' death.

"And you not only put a great deal of stress on my old heart, but you embarrassed dear Rupert and his guests, and upset him tremendously."

The anger that had been brewing just beneath the surface of her calm broke. "Well, far be it from me to upset dear Rupert! Of a certainty, I must remember to be quiet whatever happens so that I will not upset dear Rupert! Why do you always take his side in everything, Grandmother!"

“That is an absurd accusation and I will not dignify it with an answer!” Grandmother snapped. “You know very well that he was tremendously affected by the death of your parents. He has never been quiet the same. His nerves were quiet shattered by the terrible accident!”

Melantha gaped at her grandmother. “His? And well they should be!” she snapped angrily, jumping up from her seat abruptly. “For it was his fault they died!”

“How can you say such a terrible, terrible thing!” Grandmother gasped in outrage.

“Because it is true! They would not have been there at all if not for him, for they had gone to rescue him from yet another of his wild escapades and you know that as well as I do! And furthermore, he is a cold, unfeeling monster! He did not shed a single tear. He was too busy trying to figure out the quickest way to run through his inheritance--and mine!”

“Melantha Eugenia Mansfield! How dare you say such awful things about your brother when he has not once complained of having to give up all chance for happiness for himself only because he has not managed to see you suitably settled!”

“I am not settled because he mismanaged my dowry!” Melantha exclaimed. “And the last I heard the bachelors in London were not hanging out for paupers for brides!”

“That is grossly unjust and well you know it! He was little more than a boy, trying to take on responsibilities far beyond his years!”

“He is ten years my senior, Grandmother, and he was no ‘boy’. He was a man full grown, for I was ten!”

Struggling with the urge to burst into tears, Melantha fled the breakfast parlor and ran headlong into the man standing well within hearing distance of the ugly argument she had just had with her grandmother.

Righting herself with an effort, she threw an uncomfortable glance in the general direction of Lord Blackthorne’s face, mumbled an apology and hurried away. She was tempted to flee to her room, but it was not the sanctuary that it had been before and on impulse, she turned and headed toward the stables. She had almost reached them when it dawned on her that she was not dressed for riding.

Halting, she considered her options for a moment and finally decided to take the path into the woods anyway. She was too distressed to remark where she was walking and found herself in the clearing near the stream that bisected the property with surprise. It was a pleasant place, however, and after looking around a little absently for several moments, she found a grassy spot on the bank and sat down, staring at the cascading water meditatively.

She should not have said those things to her grandmother, she realized guiltily. She had behaved and spoken very disrespectfully. It did not matter that she had said nothing but what she saw as the truth, expressed anger and resentment that had been caged inside of

her for years, she should not have distressed her grandmother with it.

She hardly knew herself. Perhaps she never had. She had expressed things in her diary that she should never have even thought about let alone set down with pen and paper, and look where that had gotten her!

As angry as it had made her, the stranger was right. She was no lady. She had earnestly tried but the best she had ever managed was no more than a veneer, and even that was crumbling around her with all the things she had had to deal with since her diary had been stolen.

Her nerves were stretched so taut it took almost nothing to make her lash out at anyone that provoked her temper.

Embarrassment flooded her cheeks at that thought for it instantly reminded her that she had run right into Lord Blackthorne when she had rushed out of the breakfast parlor. It was too much to hope that he had not heard the entire sordid tale.

She wondered if it was also too much to hope that he would not air their dirty laundry among the gossip mongers once he returned to town.

Not that she cared what the man thought. It hardly seemed to matter anymore. She had infuriated the man who held her life in his hands last night and she was certain that the chances were very good, after she had nearly gotten him caught, that he would think twice before returning. And if she was right and he was not one of Rupert's guests then that extinguished her only hope of getting her diary back.

She was doomed. It was no wonder she was so tense and excitable. She felt like someone that had been condemned and was only waiting for the ax to fall.

She thrust that thought from her mind, for it only increased her agitation and she had come to seek calm.

She was going to have to apologize to her grandmother, she realized after a few moments. It irked her that she had to when she was still so angry with her, still felt as if she had been treated unfairly, but there would be no peace in the house if she did not. Very likely her grandmother would not speak to her for days, regardless, but as irritating as her grandmother was, she loved her and depended on her for the only companionship she had.

She was miserable already. Having no one at all to talk to and being treated like a pariah was not going to make her feel any better.

Sighing, she was about to get to her feet when the snap of a branch close by brought her head around with a jerk. Her eyes widened when she saw Lord Blackthorne step from the pathway and approach her. Unnerved to find herself alone with him in such a secluded area, she darted an uneasy glance around, wondering if anyone was near enough to come if she called--or if they even would come.

Evidently, he saw the look of cornered game in her expression, for he stopped as Melantha had just begun to contemplate leaping to her feet and running. After glancing around, he moved to a young sapling and leaned against it. "If I am intruding," he said in his deep voice, "say so and I will take myself off."

Melantha relaxed fractionally. A wry smile curled her lips. "As you no doubt heard, I had fully vented my spleen before I left the house. I must apologize for ... my abominable behavior and for making you uncomfortable."

He shrugged. "I am not easily distressed."

Melantha studied her hands. "I have not been quite myself lately. Not that that is an excuse for speaking to my grandmother that way."

"Sometimes it is best to vent one's feelings rather than to keep them bottled up."

"Except when expressing them distresses someone else," Melantha retorted wryly.

She surprised a look of understanding in his eyes. "You were young when you lost your parents. It could not have been easy."

She nodded, allowing herself to think about it when she had worked hard for years not to think about it at all. "I was so ... angry," she said, almost surprised. "I felt as if they had abandoned me."

"And it gave you night terrors?"

She shuddered. "I was not dreaming last night."

"I did not suggest that you were," he murmured after a rather prolonged silence.

She sent him a quick glance and finally sighed, wondering why she felt comfortable enough to talk about it with him when he was virtually a stranger. But perhaps that was exactly why she felt comfortable enough to talk about it? Because he was a stranger and she did not expect to see him again once he had left Remington Manor. After what he had already heard, it certainly could not make things worse to explain what had happened. "I did have night terrors for a time after ... after they were killed. But I have not done so in years. It was a ... horrible carriage accident. Mother died at once. They said she had broken her neck. Father was dead by the time they managed to get him home. I wish that I had not seen them like that. The image is something that never goes away. And ... I can not even picture them in my mind the way they were before."

Sighing, she got to her feet, examining the grass stains on her gown with a grimace. "Grandmother will fuss about this, as well."

"She has gone to her room with the vapors," he supplied dryly. "I think you can safely return without that risk at the moment."

Melantha looked at him guiltily. "I am a terrible person."

"Because you feel that your grandmother favors your brother above you? If that made

you a terrible person, then at least half of everyone I know would fit into the same category. In any case, it is not merely your imagination that she favors ‘dear’ Rupert,” he retorted, falling into step beside her as she returned to the path and headed toward the manor. “Perhaps her reasons are not what you think, but as an unbiased observer that much is certainly very clear.”

Melantha considered that in frowning silence. “That does not make me feel better,” she said finally.

He shrugged. “The truth rarely does make one feel better.”

“Why do you think she does not care for me as she does Rupert?” she asked in a small voice. “I am ... a great trial to her, I know, but one would think it would at least count for something that I am very like my mother, her daughter.”

“She does not depend upon you for her livelihood, however,” he said dryly. “Then, too, she proscribes to the school of thought that men are never to be blamed for anything, particularly when they happen to be the heir.”

Melantha looked at him in surprise. “I thought everyone proscribed to that particular school of thought.”

His mouth curled up at one corner. “I certainly do whenever it suits the occasion.”

Melantha could not help but chuckle, for she saw that he was teasing. She found that she was almost sorry that they had reached the grounds again. “You are very kind,” she said, stopping and smiling up at him.

To her surprise, his good humor vanished. His gaze flickered over her face keenly as his face hardened. “I am never kind and you are naïve to think so. Men are not prone to feel ‘kindness’ toward a beautiful woman, Melantha. And if they seem to be, you should always suspect their motives.”

He left her standing with her mouth at half mast, striding purposefully toward the stables. After a moment, Melantha collected herself and headed toward the house, wondering if he meant that she should not trust him, or if the comment had been directed toward Sir Knightly because of the incident he had observed in her room the night before.

Chapter Ten

It did not escape Melantha that Lord Blackthorne was implying that men only put themselves out to behave ‘kindly’ toward women they were interested in bedding.

She thought that was what he had meant anyway and could not help but wonder if he included himself in that sweeping statement. Try, though she might, however, she could not recall that he had looked at her in any way that seemed to bear that up. He had seemed far more inclined to look down his nose at her, as if she was beneath contempt, certainly unworthy of his regard.

That would have set her back up except for the tiny detail that he had found her in his room attempting to pick the lock on his portmanteau and she was obliged to admit that, if their roles had been reversed, she would not have thought well of him either.

All things considered, she found it more than a little bit of a pleasant surprise that he had put himself out to check on her when he had seen her flee the house in distress, and had even unbent enough to say things that had helped her feelings.

It occurred to her to wonder as she returned to the house if he had considered that he was warning her. Perhaps he thought that she was so sheltered and backwards that she had no notion of how to deal with men at all? That she would fall prey to one of Rupert's friends? He had certainly watched Sir Knightly when he was with her. She had tried very hard not to notice him, and truthfully she was not certain that he had been watching, for he could well have been staring at nothing at all, or something beyond her.

It warmed her to think that he had, and that he had been thoughtful enough, or concerned enough, to mention it.

If he only knew, she thought wryly! She was in far more danger from the sneak thief who brazenly stole into her room each night to torment her!

He wanted those papers, and she shuddered to think to what lengths he was willing to go to get them. He had already compromised her virtue--shattered it completely. What if he tired of the 'game' he had invented to toy with her? He had seemed contemptuous of her inexperience, doubtful that she could give him enough pleasure even to make it worth his while.

And he had deflowered her. What if that had been his ultimate goal and he had no more use for her now that he had taken her maidenhead?

She knew he had, even if no else knew it--yet. And perhaps no one else would ever know.

She had to find a way to stop him. The risk of discovery grew greater with each intrusion. And if he was caught, nothing else would matter, not the diary, and not her lost maidenhead. She would be ruined.

Idiot that she was, she had not even considered that the night before!

She paused in the hallway when she had entered the house, wondering if she should go up to apologize to her grandmother straight away, or if it might be best to allow her time to cool down a bit.

Deciding she was not up to another confrontation with her grandmother at the moment, she went into the kitchen to find something to eat to tide her over until luncheon.

Rupert, she discovered, along with Sir Knightly, Sir Johns, Mr. Markam, and Lord Cleeves had gone hunting. Her mind instantly leapt to the possibility of searching their rooms, but then it occurred to her that Lord Blackthorne was skulking about and she was

liable to run into him even if she managed to slip past the servants.

It was extremely inconvenient that they had all been located in another wing from her own room for she could not go into that wing at all without raising eyebrows.

Balked of that possibility, she set out to see if she could discover what she had done with the papers the man was so determined to have. After searching her small writing desk, which stood in one corner of the small parlor, and coming up empty handed she searched every other drawer and cabinet in the room and even emptied her and her grandmother's work baskets, all to no avail.

Leaving the small parlor, she stood in the main corridor for a while, trying to prod her memory. That, too, proved fruitless, not because it had been so long ago so much as the fact that she had not really paid that much attention to what she was doing at the time. She had been far more focused on the casket itself and her delight in finding the secret panel where she could keep her diary.

After a moment, she strode down the corridor and into Rupert's study. She rarely went into the room whether Rupert was in residence or not, mostly because there was nothing of any interest to her in the room. She thought it very likely, though, since she had thought the papers might be important, that she could have taken them to Rupert's study to put with other important papers.

The room was dark. The moment she entered the room she felt as if she had entered a purely male domain, for the smells were all man--the mingling scents of brandy and scotch and bourbon overlay the lighter scents of shaving soap, pomade, books and newsprint, leather and horses.

She felt--wicked only to be in the room, as if she were trespassing where she had no right to be.

And she felt vaguely excited by that fact.

Not frightened. Intrigued.

Dismissing her faintly accelerated pulse after a moment, she crossed the room and pushed back the drapes to let more light in to help her see. Almost as an afterthought, she opened the window to allow the room to air a little, although she doubted the men minded and she certainly did not. Turning, she planted her hands on her hips and surveyed the room.

Rupert's desk was certainly the most likely spot to search.

The top was cluttered, amazingly enough, since Rupert was not much for keeping his accounts and had never used the room for much besides entertaining his guests. There was a nearly empty decanter on it. Ignoring the messy surface for the moment, she opened the drawers and looked through them one by one, carefully but quickly, her mind focused on identifying the characteristics of the papers she recalled. She saw nothing in any of the drawers she opened, however, that had the aged look of the papers she

remembered.

One drawer was locked. After tugging on it several times to be certain that it was locked and not merely stuck, she let go of the knob and frowned at it, wondering if there was any possibility that the papers could be in the drawer Rupert had locked. A moment's consideration assured her that she had to know for certain before she could dismiss the desk as the resting place of those papers and she began to search the desk top for a key.

With little surprise she discovered there wasn't one and pulled a hair pin from her chignon, pushing it into the key hole to see if she could turn the bolt with it. Irritated when several moments of struggling only produced a broken nail, she straightened, glaring at the difficult lock and wondering if Rupert's letter opener was thin enough to slip through the crevice at the top to pry the drawer open.

Deciding she might have more luck with it, she pushed the pin back into her hair and made another search for the letter opener. Again, she came up empty handed and for several moments her frustration threatened to get the best of her.

The nearly empty decanter snagged her attention as she stood glaring her frustration at the uncooperative lock and slowly her attention shifted to the bottle and curiosity surfaced. After glancing at it uncertainly a couple of times, she pulled the stopper out and sniffed the contents. The smell was potent, but not altogether unpleasant. She studied it hesitantly for several moments, and then looked around for a clean tumbler and poured herself just enough to taste.

The liquor burned like pure fire when she took a cautious sip, making her eyes water, and burned worse when it hit her stomach. Gasping for breath, she set the tumbler down and sucked in a few cooling breaths of air. She could not imagine why men would like drinking the stuff! It did not taste at all like it smelled as far as she could tell, although to be truthful it was a little hard to tell what it tasted like after it set fire to her tongue. She certainly could not tell if it was what he had tasted like.

Shuddering, she pushed the stopper back into the bottle and focused on carefully lifting the papers on the desk and looking through them and then carefully replacing them as she had found them. There was a rather large casket sitting squarely on one corner and since it was not locked, she opened it to peer inside.

It was filled with cheroots.

After staring at them speculatively for a moment, she took one out and sniffed it cautiously. It had a bit of a sweet smell to it that seemed vaguely familiar. She wondered if it was like the liquor, if it tasted nothing at all like it smelled. More cautious now, she stuck the tip of her tongue to it to taste the tobacco. Almost immediately, her tongue began to burn. Fanning it, she looked around a little desperately for something to get rid of the taste and finally grabbed up the tumbler she had set down, gulping the last swallow.

“Still searching for that elusive gift, I presume?”

Uttering a shriek, Melantha tossed the tumbler and the cheroot into the air, and then grabbed frantically for them. She only managed to bat both around, however, not to catch either. As both the cheroot and the tumbler hit the floor, she looked up guiltily to discover that Lord Blackthorne was propped against the door of the study, eyeing her with something akin to amusement.

Damn and blast! The man was always sneaking up on her when she was doing something she ought not. “I ... uh ... actually I was just tidying up a bit.”

His expression was sardonic. “So I see.”

She cleared her throat, wondering how long he had been standing in the doorway and how much he had seen. “I thought you went riding,” she added weakly.

Shrugging, he pushed away from the doorframe and strode toward her. Melantha backed up a few steps as he approached, encountering Rupert’s desk chair. He slanted a glance at her but evidently decided to ignore the retreat. “Ordinarily, I don’t touch the stuff this early in the day, but I hate to see a lady drink alone.”

Melantha blinked at him. “But I wasn’t.”

He looked down at the tumbler on the floor pointedly.

Melantha looked down at it, too, wishing she had kicked it beneath the desk. He reached down and picked it up, examined it for debris and set it on the desk top. After glancing around, he found another tumbler and set it beside the first. Pouring a small amount into each tumbler, he held one out to Melantha. “Thank you, but I did not particularly care for it.”

His dark brows rose. “No? Perhaps you did not drink it right. It steadies the nerves, you know.”

“It does?” Melantha asked, looking at the glass a little doubtfully. Her nerves were on edge. Grandmother tended to dose herself with laudanum when she was nervous, but Melantha had never liked to take the stuff. She especially disliked it now, for it had relaxed her to the point that she was fair game for the sneak thief--not that she thought there was any danger that he would come during the light of day, but the experience was enough to clinch her dislike of taking laudanum at all.

“It does,” he assured her, catching her hand and guiding it to the glass. When she had taken it, he lifted his tumbler from the desk top. “Cheers.”

He clicked his glass against hers and then lifted it to his lips, tilted his head back and downed the contents in one gulp.

Shrugging, Melantha tipped her head back and poured the contents down her own throat. For almost a full minute afterward, she could not catch her breath at all. When she finally managed to catch her breath, she coughed for several minutes more. Taking the

glass from her limp hand, he patted her back.

“Better?” he asked when she finally managed to stop coughing.

She nodded more from politeness than because she actually felt better, unless one considered that she felt better being able to breathe. The movement sent a wave of dizziness washing through her. Glancing from Lord Blackthorne to the glass suspiciously, she put out a hand to steady herself.

He caught it, placing her palm against his chest.

“I feel a little ... peculiar,” she said, discovering without a great deal of surprise that her tongue felt strangely uncoordinated. “Was there something in that?”

His lips curled. “Brandy.”

“Oh. It was very good, thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I believe I will go and lie down now,” she said a little faintly.

He slipped a hand along her waist, guiding her toward the door. By the time they reached it, she was listing heavily to one side. Fortunately, he was on that side. “The nerves steadier now?”

She lifted her head with an effort, sliding her cheek along his shoulder where she discovered it had been resting. “I am not at all Yes, I believe they are,” she finished, surprised and vaguely pleased to discover she felt very relaxed. “I do feel strange, though.”

“Possibly that is because you did not eat this morning.”

“I didn’t?” she asked, surprised that he seemed to know, but then she remembered she had argued with her grandmother and left without eating. “Oh.”

She had only managed to negotiate a few stairs when Lord Blackthorne bent and scooped her up into his arms. Her head spun crazily with the motion and she had to drop it to his shoulder to keep it from spinning right off of her shoulders. “You should not do this,” she said, draping her arms around his neck.

“I am certain I should.”

“I am a long Meg,” she told him confidentially, “and you will injure something, or drop me. And I do not think I would care for that.”

“I won’t drop you.”

She tightened her arms around his neck, breathing in his scent and feeling her head spin harder with the delight that rushed through her. “You smell wonderful,” she said dreamily. “Where are we going?”

“You are going to lie down and sleep.”

Amusement threaded his voice, but she found she wasn't particularly annoyed by it. "I am so tired. But I think I will fall off the bed. Everything is spinning."

"You won't." Reaching the upper floor at last, he turned toward her room, shifting her in his arms to reach the door knob and push the door open. She sighed when he bent down and settled her near the center of the bed, releasing her hold on his neck reluctantly.

"Thank you, my lord. You are so kind," she murmured, rolling onto her side and curling up.

He brushed the backs of the fingers of one hand lightly along her cheek. "You only say that, my dear, because you have no idea how absolutely ruthless I can be," he murmured grimly.

* * * *

Melantha woke, thoroughly disoriented to discover that she was in bed fully clothed. Yawning, she stretched to relieve the kinks in her muscles and rolled onto her back, lifting her head to look down at herself. Her counterpane, she discovered, had been pulled over her, but she was lying on top of half of it.

Her head swirled a little dizzily and then righted itself, throbbing with a dull pain as she sat up finally. She lifted a hand to it, pressing against the pain and trying to sort through the disjointed memories that surfaced.

Her mouth, she realized after a moment, was dry and tasted loathsome.

Feeling vaguely ill, she climbed off the bed with an effort and discovered her slippers were missing when the coolness from the floor penetrated her stockings. Casting around for them, she finally discovered they were not on the bed, but rather beneath the edge.

Her confusion deepening rather than lifting, she moved to her washbasin and cleaned her mouth to rid herself of the awful taste and then splashed water on her face, still slowly digesting the bits and pieces of memory that flickered through her mind.

A groan escaped her when she finally pieced it all together and recalled the incident in Rupert's study with painful clarity. Lord Blackthorne had caught her experimenting with the forbidden--Rupert's tobacco and liquor.

"Oh god!" she muttered, plopping down on her vanity bench and covering her face with her hands. What had possessed her now, of all times, to decide to do something so scandalous? A lady never, never imbibed strong spirits! And certainly never touched tobacco!

She had no idea why she had even been curious.

Liar! Her mind instantly accused her.

From the moment she had gone into Rupert's study she had felt keyed up and excited about finding herself in a purely male domain, and intrigued by the scents that had

surrounded her ... because they reminded her so forcefully of the man who had been in her room the night before and kissed her senseless.

The man who had come back and invaded her dreams and done all sorts of absolutely forbidden and exciting things to her.

She frowned at that, getting up and moving to the window. From the light, it looked to be around mid day. Had she slept only a few hours then? Or around the clock?

She did a self search and found that she felt surprisingly well rested, particularly in light of the fact that she had spent several nearly sleepless nights in a row.

Lord Blackthorne had known exactly what would happen when he had ... bullied her into drinking that liquor! She distinctly recalled that he had said it was brandy and that it had probably gone to her head because she had not eaten breakfast!

He had carried her up the stairs as if she was child and tucked her into bed, she remembered abruptly.

Mortified that she had heaped scandalous behavior on top of scandalous behavior, she returned to the bench abruptly, trying to recall if they had encountered any of the servants along the way. She was slightly relieved when she realized they hadn't.

And very likely Lord Blackthorne had not expected to.

Or maybe he had not particularly cared whether they did or not?

He had not had evil designs on her, she realized after a moment, feeling somewhat put out to realize that he had made no attempt at all to take advantage of her.

He had also said he had not done it out of kindness.

Was he just that revolted by the thought that someone might think of him as a kind man? Or had he had some other reason for doing it?

She could not think of one.

There seemed to be little doubt that he had been standing in the doorway watching her for quite some time. He had commented on her 'search' for her mythical present. She could not imagine why he would care, though, when it was Rupert's belongings that she was rifling through.

What must he be thinking of her when he had caught her twice searching through things that were not hers? And overheard her hateful remarks to her grandmother and her nasty trick on dear Rupert.

He could not help but think she was the most horrid female in the world!

Not that it mattered.

Except that it made her feel like crying.

She had to wonder, though, when she continued to display herself in front of him as the

worst sort of creature, why he behaved--mostly--in a very gentleman-like manner toward her. He had certainly passed up a prime chance for having his way with her earlier, for no one had been about, and she had not been in any condition to defend herself. He had taken liberties he should not have--carrying her into her room, for instance--but Sir Knightly had displayed more of an inclination to seduce her, a good deal more, for his gaze was always admiring.

She frowned at that thought, wondering if there was some sort of rivalry between the two men. Or perhaps not a rivalry precisely, but it seemed certain that they disliked one another.

Maybe that was why Lord Blackthorne always assured her that he was not being kind. Because he was bent on thwarting Sir Knightly's dishonorable intentions toward her, not to be kind to her, but merely to annoy Sir Knightly?

It almost seemed to fit, except that she could not figure out how convincing her to drink the liquor he knew was going to knock her for a loop had anything at all to do with Sir Knightly, who had not even been on the place at the time.

Maybe, she thought wryly, he simply saw it as assuring peace within the household, for he had certainly not failed to notice that she was completely on edge and within a hair's breadth of yielding to hysterics.

Pushing it from her mind, she got up and changed out of the woefully wrinkled frock that she was wearing, tidied her hair and pushed her feet into her slippers.

Whatever his reasons, and she suspected she would eventually find out what they were, the result for the moment was that she felt rested and more cleared headed and more able to face the challenge that she had to meet.

Grandmother was seated in solitary state in the dining room when she arrived downstairs and went to look. She sniffed coldly at Melantha when she entered the room, which was Melantha's cue to apologize. After a fairly minimal amount of groveling and begging pardon, she relaxed sufficiently to read Melantha a lecture over her head while she tried to choke down her luncheon.

The hunting party arrived before they were done, full of good spirits at the success of their hunt, damp from their exertions, their boots caked with mud and streaked with dirt and blood, and their clothing reeking of horse. They halted abruptly at the door at the sight of Melantha and her grandmother but followed Rupert inside when he insisted they not stand on ceremony and Grandmother, as usual, smiling supported his assurance. "For there is no fun at all in rustivating if one can not relax and enjoy oneself without worrying about all the rules and restrictions one has to deal with in London," Rupert said jauntily.

Lord Cleeves and Lord Knightly politely declined the offer, heading upstairs to clean up. A few moments later, Lord Blackthorne, looking impeccable, sauntered into the room

and took his seat.

“You should have come with us, old chap!” Rupert exclaimed as he dug into his food with enthusiasm. “We bagged that old sonofa--stag that eluded us the other day, by damn! Excuse me, Grandmother.”

Grandmother nodded regally. “I did not mean you should be that informal,” she murmured chidingly.

Reddening at the chastising tone, he sent his Grandmother a narrow eyed look, which she pretended not to notice. “Come, Melantha. We are done, and they will be more comfortable if we take ourselves off.”

Melantha was not done. She had scarcely begun since Grandmother had spent most of the time since she had arrived lecturing her, but she set her fork down and got up, tense from the moment Lord Blackthorne had entered the room and fairly certain that she would not be able to swallow a morsel in any event. It was Lord Blackthorne, she saw, who helped her with her chair. Briefly, their gazes met. His eyes were keenly assessing, but she looked away at once, excused herself, and followed her grandmother from the room.

Her stomach began to complain long before they reached the small parlor that she had merely teased it with sustenance and failed to follow up. Trying to ignore the quarreling, she settled in the chair she usually did and looked down at her basket of mending without a great deal of enthusiasm.

“What is that?” Grandmother said presently, lifting her head and listening intently. “Is that that old tom I hear quarreling?”

Melantha reddened. “If you will excuse me a moment, Grandmother, I believe I will go out to the kitchen and find something to appease the quarrelling cats.”

Grandmother waved her away. “Oh, don’t worry about it on my account. It’s not bothering me.”

Melantha sent her a wry glance and sighed. “Just the same, I believe I will if you do not object to being abandoned.”

Grandmother sniffed, making another shooing motion in her general direction. “I am certain I must grow accustomed to it, for I am old now and my company is not much sought after.”

Melantha resisted the urge to roll her eyes, knowing full well that her grandmother did not care for her company at all. She was miffed because Rupert had made it clear that they should leave so that he could enjoy regaling his guests with his prowess on the hunting field without having to guard his tongue. Ignoring the none too subtle plea for sympathy, she headed out to the kitchen for another cold, dry piece of toast to hold her until the evening meal, thinking she might just as well have slept through luncheon.

Everyone had returned and it seemed doubtful that they would go out again, and so she had missed another opportunity to search for either the diary or the damnable papers.

Fate was working against her.

Chapter Eleven

If it had not been for the fact that Melantha had hardly had a bite to eat all day, she would have begged off supper as soon as she discovered that Rupert and his guests meant to sit down to dine with them. She had spent the entire day carefully guarding herself from examining or accepting her fall from grace, trying to pretend that it had been just as she had thought to begin with, nothing but another powerfully stimulating dream, but it had tormented the back of her mind, nevertheless.

She was subdued when she took her seat at the table, agonizingly conscious of the possibility that one of the men sitting at the table with her might well have been the lover who had stolen her future happiness. It almost made it worse that she had no idea which one it might be.

It made it considerably worse when she recalled how gloriously she had enjoyed her fall from grace, the moans, and cries of encouragement she had uttered that had driven him beyond restraint. She dimly remembered the strong taste of spirits when he had kissed her, and knew he must have been nearly as recklessly inebriated as she had been uninhibited by the drug in her blood, but she held out little hope that he would have been too drunk to remember the incident.

It did not help that they had scarcely seated themselves at the table when it dawned on her abruptly that she had been in no state at all to identify the man. Horror filled her when she realized that. She had assumed that it was the man who had come into her room so many times before, who had set a bargain with her--her virtue in exchange for the damning diary.

But what if it had not been?

Every man at the table had been in her room earlier, staring at her. And every one of them except, perhaps, Lord Blackthorne, had been well into their cups even then. Sir Knightly certainly had been, for she distinctly recalled how carefully he had negotiated the distance from the door to her vanity, and the blatantly appreciative gaze he had raked her with that he had made no attempt to hide.

What if the man who had been stealing into her room was not one of them as she had begun to suspect, but the man who had ... rutted her the night before had been one of them?

Illogically, she felt a horrifying sense of guilt at that possibility, as if she had not only sinned of fornication, but sinned of infidelity on top of that.

It was insane, of course, for she had certainly not had a commitment to her 'thief' save for the bargain he had struck with her, which she had never verbally agreed to, even if

she had consented by her actions.

She could feel her color fluctuating madly as the thoughts tumbled through her mind, felt first uncomfortably warm and then chilled, and she was struggling to regulate the skip and flutter of her heart rate when the man across from her spoke.

“Are you feeling unwell?”

Melantha’s head came up with a jerk and she pasted a false smile on her face as she stared at Lord Cleeves, trying to figure out what he had asked her. “I beg your pardon? I’m afraid I was not listening to the conversation.”

The man next to him, Sir Johns, chuckled.

Melantha felt her face grow redder and redder as she glanced around the table and discovered that all conversation had halted and everyone was looking at her. She saw mild surprise in their eyes, but no condemnation and no sly smirks.

“Lord Cleeves was just assuring you that he and I and Mr. Markam had thoroughly searched the grounds on your behalf last evening and found no sign of a house breaker,” Sir Johns informed her. “I fear he feels a bit deflated.”

Deflated, Melantha thought, feeling a spark of indignation? That she was not beside herself with appreciation for the fact that he had just confirmed everyone’s suspicions that she was either hysterical or had roused the house for her amusement? She smiled with an effort. “Thank you for checking. I felt much better--much safer, knowing that you had gone to search ... last night. I do not think I would have slept a wink if you had not.”

His face darkened faintly. “That is not to say there was no one. Only that I did not find anyone.”

“Or any signs that there had been anyone,” Rupert put in helpfully. “It was just as I said, night terrors. Grandmother and I insisted she take a dose of laudanum to soothe her nerves and as you see she is feeling right as rain now.”

Suppressing the urge to laugh a little hysterically at the inaccuracy of that observation, Melantha focused on her plate.

“Is she?” Sir Knightly drawled.

His gaze was assessing, but otherwise unfathomable, Melantha discovered when she glanced at him. She could not see sympathy, but then she also did not see anything that indicated that he had knowledge that no one else did. She smiled with an effort. “She is,” she lied, wondering if she would be able to make it through the meal without completely disgracing herself.

She was tremendously relieved when the meal came to an end, and at the same time her stomach knotted with tension at the realization that she was staring at retiring for the night and she had no idea of how she was going to deal with her phantom lover.

It seemed indisputable that she would have to deal with him on her own, for if she screamed the house down as she had the night before, most likely she would find herself dosed with laudanum again, and completely at the man's mercy--of which he seemed to have none.

Or any other of the rakes now residing under her brother's roof who might take the notion to have a go at her.

Dismay filled her when she discovered that Rupert's guests seemed to be laboring under some misguided, if kindly, conspiracy to 'cheer her up', for they retired very shortly from the dining room and joined her and her grandmother in the parlor.

It was crowded, for the small room had not been designed with entertainment in mind and Melantha felt stifled by the number of men crowding into the room. She was tempted to plead a headache and retire until it occurred to her that her grandmother might decide she needed another dose of laudanum to help her sleep.

"You should play something for us, my dear," Grandmother suggested complacently, obviously pleased that they were to have company.

"I expect she sings and plays like an angel," Lord Cleeves commented gallantly.

The comment surprised a burst of laughter from Grandmother. "As to that, I am afraid she plays and sings rather indifferently, but she rarely hits a sour note, so it is not excruciating to listen to. And beggars can not be choosers," she said cheerfully.

If the floor had opened beneath her and swallowed her, Melantha would have been a happy woman. Under the circumstances, no one particularly wanted to second Grandmother's motion that she play for their entertainment nor to compound her embarrassment by begging off.

Realizing finally that she could hardly disappoint them after that glowing introduction and feeling a hostess' obligation to at least attempt to smooth over their discomfort, Melantha got up and moved to the piano. She was nervous for all that, and took a few minutes to calm herself under the pretense of looking through the sheet music for a selection to play.

Rupert broke the uncomfortable tension by announcing that he, for one, did not particularly care for Melantha's singing and would go to his study for a hand of cards if anyone was interested. Sir Johns, looking excruciatingly uncomfortable, immediately got up and excused himself.

Melantha was tempted to play badly out of sheer perverseness, and also because she did not particularly want to play, or particularly want company. She found the music soothed her frayed nerves somewhat, however, and although she started off a little roughly, partly because Sir Knightly came to prop on the piano to turn the pages for her, she relaxed enough after a few moments to play the remainder of the piece flawlessly and even with some feeling.

She blushed when she finished and both Sir Knightly, and Lord Cleeves, who had come to stand on the other side of her, clapped when she had finished. "Tolerable?" she guessed. "Or are you simply relieved that I did not damage your ears?"

Lord Cleeves chuckled, giving her an admiring glance. "Much better than merely tolerable," he assured her and asked her if she knew a particular tune that was popular at the moment.

It pleased Melantha immensely that she did. Lord Cleeves, whom she discovered had a very pleasant singing voice, began singing the lyrics about halfway through, and she joined him, singing the chorus, which was the only part of the song she was completely familiar with.

"You are a lady of many talents, I see," Sir Knightly commented when she had finished playing and everyone had applauded everyone's efforts.

Melantha glanced at him quickly, feeling a blush mount her cheeks as it occurred to her to wonder if the comment was as innocent as it seemed or if it was threaded with innuendo as she thought. She saw nothing to tell her one way or the other and finally merely mumbled a polite response, looking away.

"You must join me in a dance ... if Lord Cleeves will be so kind as to play it for us again."

Melantha glanced from one man to the other uncomfortably. "Oh! I am not at all certain I can remember the steps. It has been a very long time since I danced."

She found herself taking Sir Knightly's hand, though, and following him as Lord Cleeves took her place at the piano. When they had found an area clear enough to allow for the movements of the dance, Lord Cleeves struck up the tune.

Embarrassed when she discovered she did not remember the steps, she halted and watched Sir Knightly for a moment. Calling a halt to the music, he walked her through the steps until she became more confident and then commanded Lord Cleeves to begin again. Feeling rather more like she was dancing with her dance instructor than a beau, Melantha still found she was enjoying herself until she happened to glance at Lord Blackthorne as she turned.

His expression was stony--with disapproval she thought--and she missed a step as she turned again.

"We are tired," Grandmother announced, getting to her feet as the music stopped.

"Come, Melantha. We should retire and allow Rupert's guests to enjoy their evening."

Embarrassed by the censure in her grandmother's voice, Melantha merely gaped at her in dismay for several moments before a glare from her grandmother as she started toward the door prompted her to murmur her excuses.

"That was not well done," Grandmother hissed in a perfectly audible whisper as she and

Melantha started up the stairs.

Melantha glanced at her grandmother in surprise. "It was only a country dance," she pointed out with a mixture of confusion and dawning indignation.

Her grandmother snorted. "Being polite and helping to entertain dear Rupert's guests is one thing, but you should have made your excuses when he invited his guests to his study for cards. It is very unbecoming to intrude when they are not your guests."

As angry as the accusation made her, Melantha supposed she could see her grandmother's point. If they had been her guests, she would not have been happy for them to go off with another member of the family to entertain themselves and ignore her.

She supposed kindness had prompted it, that they had seen that she was distressed over the night before and wanted to try to cheer her up. She should have realized that and declined the offer, but she had not really been thinking. She had merely followed her grandmother's prompting to play.

She still thought the accusation unjust, because she had not encouraged them that she could recall.

Responding with a chilly good night to her grandmother's cold one, she went into her room and took care not to slam the door behind her with temper. Dread filled her the moment she entered the room, and a coiling tension that had nothing at all to do with anxiety that the phantom would steal into her room again and everything to do with a sense of anticipation she knew very well she should not feel.

She thought, in fact, that the dread was because she felt breathless with anticipation and knew she should not. She could not completely dispel the fear that lingered that she had been intimate with two different men, found pleasure with both and that that said something about her that she found repugnant, but deep down she felt like she knew her lover, knew his touch, knew his kiss and, drugged or not, she would have known at once that it was another who touched her and not the man who had first awakened her to passion.

She did not find out which emotion ruled her most strongly, however, for although she lay wakeful much of the night, he did not come to her. When a second and then a third night passed with no sign of him, Melantha had to face the one thing she did not want to face.

She longed for him to come back, ached with it. He had given her a taste of passion and she could not ignore the need he had awakened in her.

* * * *

Ransom knew he should not have gone back. He had been wrestling with the dictates of his conscience and the need that had been growing steadily more tortuous every day since he had realized what he had done. He knew he was the greatest villain unhung,

both for what he had done already, and for returning, but he had not been able to resist any longer.

He had done his utmost to lie to himself, to spare himself the guilt that had been gnawing at his gut ever since he had realized what he'd done, but the lies he had carefully built inside his head to comfort himself had collapsed like a house of cards when he had seen how distressed she was, how pale and hunted and withdrawn. He couldn't lie to himself anymore than he had not been the first to touch her, that there would be no consequences, that it did not matter.

Whatever had been done to him, whatever pain and anger he had suffered, he had had no right to involve her. He had used it, he realized, as an excuse to do what he had wanted to do from the very first moment he saw her--to take what he desired.

And he had compounded all of those lies with the lie that he had not come back because he still wanted her so badly he could taste it. He had come to make amends, to apologize, to try to make right something that could not be made right.

He had thought she was sleeping, wondered if she had dosed herself, or been dosed, with laudanum to help her sleep--because she couldn't sleep for fear that he would come.

She wasn't. As he stood staring down at her in the dimness, wishing there was enough light to see her features, she turned over in the bed and looked directly at him.

He tensed, more than half expecting her to scream and curse him for the villain he was. Instead, after staring at him for several moments, she simply pushed the covers back and slipped to the center of the bed.

His body registered the invitation before his brain did, for even in the dimness of the room, her milky white skin glowed.

She was naked and the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. His throat closed, the blood rushing from his head so swiftly to engorge his cock that he felt lightheaded, drunk with desire.

Still, he hesitated, struggling with his desire, his conscience, and a dim fear that it was a trick, that she was only trying to entice him to get him caught.

He deserved it. More than that, he found he simply did not care whether it was a trick or not. He could no more resist the invitation than he could simply stop breathing.

He undressed slowly, partly because he expected any moment for her to wake up and begin to scream at him to go, or summon her brother, and partly because his fingers were shaking so badly with need that they were clumsy and uncooperative.

She did not reach for him when he placed a knee on the bed and joined her. It disturbed him in an indecipherable way, sent a wave of doubt through him, doubt because he knew then, in that moment, that she was not welcoming. She was accepting, and that pierced him in a way he did not want to examine.

He thrust it aside as he caught the light fragrance of her skin and fire cascaded through his mind, destroying reason. Capturing her face between his palms as he settled against the softness of her body, he opened his mouth over hers, thrust his tongue past the fragile barrier of her lips, impatient to taste her. She was tense. He felt her tension in the stiffness of her body, but her taste inflamed him, sent the hunger that had been gnawing at him for days spiraling out of control.

The warmth and wetness of her mouth, the tender, smooth skin, and the suction of her mouth as she swallowed were all so reminiscent of the feel of her body as it engulfed his cock that he instantly lost all perception of anything beyond his needs. For many moments, he pleased himself with her mouth, exploring it the way he wanted to delve inside of her, but it quickly ceased to be enough. Breaking contact, he sucked in a deep breath of desperately needed air and nuzzled her face, breathing in her scent, enjoying the feel of her soft skin sliding along his cheek, gliding against his lips as he stroked his hands along her body, filling his senses with her.

Moving to her neck, he explored the smooth surface from shoulder to ear. She gasped as his breath brushed her ear, her skin pebbling with sensation. Intrigued by her reaction, he nipped at the soft flesh of her ear lobe, traced the swirls of her ear with the tip of his tongue. A shiver skated through her and she lifted her hands at last, her fingers digging into his shoulders.

Relief and exhilaration boiled through him even at so slight an encouragement and he caressed her ear again before returning to her mouth. This time when he covered her mouth, she shifted slightly toward him, opened her mouth to him, sucked at his tongue when he thrust into her mouth to explore. His belly tightened as he felt the muscles of her mouth close around his flesh, his testicles drawing painfully as more blood pumped into his cock until he could hardly breathe and no longer think for the agonizing ache. Needing respite, he pressed his aching flesh between her body and his, surging against her hip as he broke the kiss again and dipped low enough to catch one of her nipples in his mouth.

She gasped, lifting to meet him as he sucked the pebbled tip, teased it with his tongue. Her hands settled on his head, her fingers curling against his scalp, holding him to her and his impatience to be inside of her almost got the best of him. He tamped it with an effort, teasing the sensitive tip until she was moaning softly, shifting restlessly and then released that nipple and sought the mate until she began to arch her hips against him, rubbing her mound along his shaft until he thought he would explode.

He skated a hand down her body, found her nether lips and parted them with one finger, stroking her cleft, teasing her bud of pleasure until she was moaning and gasping for breath. A red haze seized him as he explored further, found her opening, and pressed his finger inside of her. Her body clung to his finger, hot, moist for him.

The realization drove all thought from his mind beyond thrusting his cock into her and

he shifted, pressing first one knee and then the other between her thighs as she opened for him, as eager to have him fill her as he was to bury his aching member inside of her and find surcease from the agony that had enveloped him in a heated red fog. Burrowing his face against her, he ground his teeth as he closed his hand around himself, guided it to her opening. Squeezing his eyes tightly, holding his breath, he pressed the head of his cock into her and withdrew it slightly, over and over, trying to focus his mind on something besides the excruciating pleasure as he pushed a little deeper until he felt her moisture coating him, felt his flesh gliding more easily.

Sweat broke from his pores at the strain of holding himself in check. He thought for several panicked moments that he would explode before he had even claimed her fully. Pausing when he had finally worked his cock deeply inside of her, he caught his breath, tried to think of anything at all besides the hot, clinging flesh that gripped him so tightly he felt as if he was strangling. Every muscle in his body began to tremble with the effort, threatening to give out.

She moved against him, the muscles of her passage clenching abruptly tighter, rippling along the length of his cock as if she was trying to thrust him from her body, or milk his seed from him.

“Mellie,” he whispered hoarsely, a warning, a benediction. A groan escaped him as he lost control, as his instincts took over and his body began to move of its own accord. Grinding his teeth, he struggled against the tide that had swept him up, trying to set a rhythm that would give her pleasure, fighting to hold his release in abeyance as he heard her soft groans, felt her moving against him.

She stiffened abruptly, uttered a long, low groan, as she dug her head into the pillows and arched her head back. Her passage clutched around him tightly, milking him, tearing the last thread of reason from him. He covered her mouth with his, thrusting his tongue inside the warm, wet cavity. His body seized even as he did so and he tore his mouth from hers, sought the last ounce of sanity he possessed and pulled his cock out of her as the convulsions drove the breath from his lungs.

She went limp beneath him before his body had ceased to heave and pump his seed onto her belly. Enervated by the release, he slumped weakly against her, gasping hoarsely for breath. His arms quaked with the effort to support even the weight of his chest above her, and he lay across her heavily, trying to gather enough energy to roll off of her before he crushed the breath from her lungs.

Finally, with a groan, he managed to roll onto his side and then onto his back. His heart was thundering so loud in his ears, he couldn't focus on anything else until it began to slow, until he could finally drag in a sustaining breath.

He wanted nothing so much as to wallow in sated bliss, drift into contented sleep, for even as his heart ceased to pound frantically and he could breathe easier, lethargy swept over him.

He could not stay, even if she wanted him to, and he knew she didn't. She had already rolled onto her side and put her back to him. Dissatisfaction pierced his bliss.

He had wrung pleasure from her body, but he had still given her pleasure. He had been half out of his mind, but part of the reason he had was because he had felt her response to him, heard her moans and little cries of pleasure.

It was perverse, he knew, to be irritated that she had found her pleasure and turned her back on him. He despised the female tendency to drape themselves over a man and try to talk when all he wanted, all he was really up to after that much expenditure, was to catch his breath and go to sleep.

It still irked the hell out of him that she showed no inclination even to cuddle up next to him in satisfaction.

Feeling dismissed and totally furious because he felt that way, both with himself and with her, he rolled to the edge of the bed and sat up, trying to gather enough energy to put his fucking clothes back on and leave by way of the god damned window, because he didn't dare try to leave by the secret door.

The anger at least sent a surge of energy through him and he got up and retrieved his clothes, shrugging them on with a complete disregard for anything beyond covering himself.

He'd begun to think she had gone to sleep, but she spoke when he had managed to drag his boots back on.

"How many pages?"

A jolt went through him. Stunned, completely at sea for a handful of moments, he swung to look down at her, trying to pierce the shadows that concealed her expression from him. "What?"

"Last time it was ten."

He had completely forgotten the fucking diary and his 'bargain'. Filled with guilt and remorse, he'd brought the god damned thing to give it to her, but a completely illogical and totally uncontrollable wave of rage swept through him when he realized she had been waiting for him because of the damned diary. Fishing the book out of his jacket pocket, he grabbed a handful of pages and ripped them out, tossing them toward the bed before he shoved the diary back into his pocket and stalked to the window.

She leapt up, but despite the momentary jolt of expectation that went through him, it was not to race to him to beg pardon for annihilating his self-esteem. Instead, she knelt on the floor, gathering up the pages that had missed the bed.

Suppressing the urge to say something really unforgivable, he focused on walking the narrow ledge to the next window down and leapt through the open window. Landing on the balls of his feet, he closed the window quietly and latched it, then headed for the

secret door, mentally berating himself for being such a fool.

That woman was going to be the death of him, he thought furiously. Because if he didn't break his damned fool neck falling out her fucking window, he was going to end up throttling her and swinging from the gallows.

Chapter Twelve

Shivering, Melantha moved to the fireplace and shredded the pages, burning them. She was dry eyed as she watched them burn, trying hard to ignore the empty feeling inside of her, but tension coiled within her and a hard knot of misery rose in her throat.

It was appalling that he could make her feel so wonderful one moment and so horribly unworthy the next.

She had hated having to ask for the damned pages. Why couldn't he have just given them to her, instead of making her ask? Wasn't it bad enough that she was bartering herself for the sake of the 'virtue' she had to give up to get the diary back?

She had nothing left, no self-respect, no virtue. All she could do was try to protect herself from scandal.

From the moment he had taken her maidenhead, he had destroyed any chance at all of ever finding happiness, of ever having a home and husband and children.

She was going to die a spinster.

And all she would have to show for her entire miserable life was the passion she had known with him.

He could at least allow her that, damn him! He could at least act like a lover, instead of a merchant!

It made her feel sick to her stomach that she had agonized over whether he would come back or not for days, and very little of it was because of the diary. She could not get that entirely out of her mind, but far more than that she had yearned to feel his touch.

He had not left her wanting, and that was almost worse, because she knew it would not be enough.

She wanted him now.

She wanted to curl up next to him and feel his warmth beside her in her bed.

And she didn't even know his name. She didn't know what he looked like.

She could pass him on the street and she would not know who he was.

Getting up finally, she moved to the washbasin to clean herself up. He had withdrawn from her and spilled his seed onto her belly. She did not know why that fact made her want to cry. She should be glad that he had done it, relieved to think that she at least did not have to worry that he would get her with child and abandon her to her fate.

She had no idea, though, if it was something he had done for her, to protect her, or if he had done it to protect himself.

She thought he must have done it to protect her because she could not see any other reason for it. It was not as if he would be forced to marry her. She didn't know who he was.

It confused her, though, made it impossible for her to dismiss him and despise him as an unfeeling monster when she needed to be able to. She felt, knew deep down, that he went to great lengths to give her as much pleasure as he took from her. And he cared enough, or was conscientious enough, to try to protect her.

How could she reconcile that with the same man who came to her like a thief in the night and took what he had no right to take? The same man who had struck a bargain with her, blackmailed her into yielding to him?

He was not lost to all sense of honor? He had at least a modicum of conscience where she was concerned? Or was it some sort of twisted sense of honor--the honor among thieves--or sinners?

She did not know, but she did know that she was becoming a slave to her desire for the man, that she was becoming more and more inclined to excuse his behavior toward her. She knew she was a fool to confuse his caresses for real caring, but reason was succumbing fast to the lure to equate passion and desire with real emotions.

She wanted to believe that she meant more to him than a mere vessel to assuage his lust on.

How pathetic was that? That she was so desperate for affection that she could fall for a thief when she didn't know anything about him all.

Angry with herself, she dressed for bed and climbed onto the mattress, resolved to do whatever it took to end this bargain between them before she did something unforgivably stupid and fell hopelessly in love with the stranger who was little more than a phantom.

All the resolve in the world, she discovered the following day, amounted to nothing when no amount of searching produced the wherewithal to free herself from the bargain she had made, but each day she tried again and each night, having failed, she climbed naked into her bed and waited for him to come to her.

And each night he came a little earlier and lingered a little longer, caressing her and taking her to such heights of pleasure that her resolve to escape him began to evaporate and her determination to guard her heart and remain aloof dissolved to nothingness. Even the pages he brought each time and lay on her vanity ceased to be a reminder in her mind and evolved into a love token of sorts, something she could use to salve her conscience for the eagerness for his touch that she could not deny or hide.

The next night he came, he seemed to forget as he had the night before, but paused when

he reached the window and returned to lay them on her vanity. Thereafter, he dropped the sheets onto the vanity the moment he entered the room, stripped his clothes off quickly and climbed onto the bed to cover her with kisses and caresses until she had to fight to catch her breath, to keep from begging him to end the torment and take her.

The fact that he always withdrew in the final moment both comforted her and disturbed her, for as the nights turned into weeks she found herself wishing that he would not, hoping each time that he would forget and give her his child.

It was a part of the obsession that had grown in her, she knew, insanity, and she still could not help wanting it and wishing things were different.

As hard as she tried to remind herself only to focus on the pleasure and nothing else, as many times as she told herself he was not really her lover, he became so comfortingly familiar that the day came when she simply forgot that their joining was no more than a transaction between them. She forgot that they were coupling, not making love, and as she lay drifting in a sea of bliss, she rolled onto her side to face him and stroked one hand caressingly across his heaving chest.

He stiffened at the touch, piercing her euphoria and reminding her instantly that she had forgotten herself. Even as she began to withdraw, however, he shifted, catching her around the waist and dragging her close. A deep sigh escaped him as she settled her cheek against his chest, yielding to the tightening of his arm that told her he wanted her there.

Content with only that much, she lay drifting lazily for a time, enjoying the restless caress of his hand as he stroked it down her back. "I don't even know your name," she said finally, tentatively.

He stiffened, remaining silent for so long that she realized she had trespassed where she shouldn't have. "Would it change anything?" he finally asked harshly.

Confusion filled her. She felt the tension in him and realized that the single question had aroused all of his anger and suspicions. He thought she was asking because she wanted to use it against him, she realized in dismay. "I would not tell anyone. I only wanted to know because ... because I want to know you."

He rolled, pushing her onto her back and levering himself up to stare down at her.

"I am a thief, a liar, and a scoundrel. A man who saw a beautiful woman he wanted and took her because he could and she was helpless to say me nay," he ground out, kissing her ruthlessly to silence her questions and then making love to her with a fierce savagery that brought both of them to the heights of passion within moments.

He did not linger afterward. He was still breathing harshly when he dressed with angry, jerky movements and left.

As sated as she was, his anger did not escape her and Melantha realized with a touch of fear and distress that she had all unwittingly broken the spell that she had woven around

them.

She dreamed and woke struggling to cry, her throat and chest tight with unshed tears. The gray light of dawn was just filtering into her windows and she lay for a while, trying to recapture sleep. It eluded her because her mind was struggling to produce some memory of what had distressed her so much.

It was not long in coming. She had dreamed that she had argued with her lover and he was leaving and she had seen him riding off and called to him over and over, but he had only kept riding, disappearing finally into the distance.

Giving up on sleep finally as the day brightened outside, she dressed and went down for breakfast. She checked when she reached the breakfast parlor, discovering that it was occupied. Sir Knightly, Mr. Markam, and Lord Blackthorne, looking as grumpy as she felt, were seated at the table. Lord Blackthorne had his nose in the morning paper, a cup of steaming coffee at one elbow. Sir Knightly was holding his head, but as she came in, he straightened and attempted a smile. "Behold, the sun rises. How are you this morning, Miss Mellie?"

Melantha checked, staring at him for several moments until the rustle of Lord Blackthorne's newspaper drew her gaze. His eyes, she saw, had narrowed on Sir Knightly broodingly. His face looked as if it had been carved from stone, however, and it was easy to see he was in no wonderful mood.

"Too forward?"

Blinking, Melantha returned her attention to Sir Knightly, pasting a tremulous smile on her lips, trying not to think about the fact that her lover called her Mellie. It was no great leap, after all, that he had shortened her name--an impertinence, to be sure since she had not even given him leave to call her by her given name, but hardly surprising when Rupert persisted in calling her Mel. Formality tended to fall by the wayside when people were thrown together for extended lengths of time and they had been staying at Remington Manor for weeks now. "Fine, thank you," she murmured, heading for the breakfast dishes that had been set out on the side board.

Thankfully, Grandmother arrived as she claimed her seat.

It caused a general exodus. Mr. Markam excused himself first, muttering something about needing to pack since he planned to leave that morning. Lord Blackthorne folded his paper, bid them a frigid good morning and rose, sauntering out of the room and leaving his coffee behind. Sir Knightly got up before he had exited the room, bid Grandmother good morning and took himself off to the stables for a morning ride to clear the 'cobwebs' from his head.

Melantha was relieved to see them go. She was not particularly fond of mornings at any time, and she had not had a decent night's sleep since the first night she had awakened to find a stranger in her room. The last thing she felt like doing was trying to be sociable.

Particularly when Sir Knightly's comment, and the look Lord Blackthorne had bent upon him was teasing at her mind.

They were roughly of the same height. Lord Blackthorne was somewhat more muscular, or at least appeared to be, for he was broader across the chest and shoulders.

The problem was she had nothing to compare either man with except a shadowy figure--and shadows were deceptive. The stranger seemed like a big man, but then with the exception of Mr. Markam, who was no more than medium height, and Lord Cleeves, who was tall but of a more slender build, that could be said of all of Rupert's guests.

Assuming her secret lover was one of them, she could certainly eliminate Mr. Markam and Lord Cleeves. That still left Sir Johns, Sir Knightly, and Lord Blackthorne.

Of those three, she knew the least about Sir Johns.

Sir Knightly had confessed himself that he had not known her brother long.

And he had called her Mellie.

And he was a rake.

They were all rakes, for that matter.

She could not truly rule any of them out, she realized in dismay. She did not think that either Mr. Markam or Lord Cleeves were as large as her lover, but she was not completely certain.

After glancing at her grandmother a few times, Melantha finally addressed her. "What do you know of the family that owned Remington Manor before?" she asked as casually as she could.

Grandmother looked at her in surprise, and then frowned thoughtfully. "The old Marquis was a gambler and a wastrel," she said dismissively.

Melantha couldn't help but agree with the censure in her voice, but since her own brother also fit that description and Grandmother thought the sun rose and set in him, she would have thought her grandmother would be somewhat more tolerant. "I had heard that and that Rupert had won the place in a game of chance."

Grandmother wrinkled her nose. "And very likely he will lose it the same way," she muttered.

Melantha glanced at her grandmother in surprise.

Grandmother shot her a look and returned her attention to her food. "I had hoped that he would grow out of some of his wildness before he was facing ruin, but I am beginning to think that hope a forlorn one. It has always been a great relief to me that you were such a sensible, level headed girl. At least I need not worry that you will ruin yourself as Rupert seems determined to do."

Melantha blushed, partly from pleasure at the compliment, but mostly from guilt.

Uncomfortable, she fell silent for a few minutes, but then redirected the conversation to the previous owners, certain that that must be the key to the stranger's obsession with the papers he pursued so ruthlessly. "What happened to the Marquis' family?" she asked tentatively after a moment.

Grandmother looked at her in surprise, but frowned, trying to prod her memory. She sighed finally. "My family did not travel in the highest circles, you must know, and I did not marry well. At least, I was very fond of your grandfather in my own way, but his family was nearly as impoverished as ours, which is why we had so little to settle upon your mother, god rest her soul." She paused, an arrested expression crossing her features and Melantha realized she had rambled until she had lost the thread of the conversation.

"The Marquis," she prompted.

Grandmother sent her an irritated look. "Well, I would have no way of knowing the family, would I? They were way above my touch. After your grandfather died, I went to live with your parents, and up until we returned a few years ago and settled in Remington Manor, I had not set foot in England in years."

"Oh," Melantha said, disappointed.

"He had sons," Grandmother pronounced abruptly.

A wave of cold swept over Melantha. "Sons? I thought--that is, I seem to recall that Rupert had said the old Marquis' heir died."

Grandmother shook her head. "Foolish! He was the heir. He should never have gone to serve, but young men can be so wild and irresponsible! Though, I suppose it was scarcely a wonder considering the father was so irresponsible."

"Serve?"

Grandmother waved her hand as if shooing a pesky fly. "In the military. He was killed ... somewhere. I am not at all certain that I heard where."

"But there was another son? So he would have the title now?"

Grandmother shrugged. "He had run off, as well--seemed neither one of them could wait to shake the dust of England."

"Both sons died?"

"How would I know that?" Grandmother said testily. "Quite possibly--there was no birthright to claim, for Remington Manor was the Marquis' main seat. And from what I heard he had pretty well wasted the entirety of his fortune before his death--the old Marquis--but the title would be his. The son--if he was still living. Not much to claim, only a title, and all the family dead. I suppose he might have thought it was not worth returning for."

It was food for thought, but not much to sink her teeth into.

The tragedy of it did not escape her and she wondered how she would feel if she had gone away for a time, for whatever reason, and returned home to find that she was alone in the world and strangers were living in her ancestral home. It would have been easier to understand, she supposed, if she had had an ancestral home, but she had wept when they had left the only home she had ever known and moved to England. She was still homesick, still missed the place, but then it had only been a few years since she had left it.

From what her grandmother said, this son of the Marquis must have been gone for a very long time. Surely he would not have gone away so long if he had felt the same ties to this place as she did to her home? She had not left because she had wanted to. She had left because Rupert had sold it and she had to.

He had had the option to stay.

But perhaps he had left because he could not stand to watch his father gamble himself into poverty and he could not stop him?

And perhaps he was not even alive anymore. Maybe the 'mystery' had nothing to do with him at all? Maybe the stranger was merely a thief who had heard about the papers somehow and had thought he could cash in with them? He had certainly spoken as if he thought the papers represented a great deal of money.

She might have had some notion of what he hoped to gain if she had any idea what the papers were.

Realizing that she was very little closer to the truth than she had been before, she tried to dismiss the tale from her mind and focus on her own dilemma.

She was no easier in her mind when Mr. Markam left mid-morning to return to his own estate before heading for London. She knew that was the signal that Rupert and all of his guests would soon leave.

She tried to convince herself that it would be a relief, that she would be glad to see them go so that she could return to the boringly predictable existence she had had before, but quite aside from the fact that she still had not recovered her diary, it distressed her to think her lover would not come to her again.

How could she bear never to be kissed and caressed again? As lonely and miserable as she had been before at least she had not known what was missing from her life. She had suspected, but she had not tasted. Now her dreams could not comfort her because they were only a pale shadow of what she felt when he came to her.

She did her best to dismiss those thoughts, but they haunted her throughout the day as she searched the house yet again, even going up into the attic to look.

By evening, she had reached the conclusion that she had to find somehow at least to discover the identity of her lover. She had to know who he was. She supposed in the back of her mind she had some strange idea that knowing who he was would mean that

she could hold on to him, or at least a part of him, when she knew that was not true, but she could not shake the desperate need to know.

Resolution, or perhaps desperation, had chased away all other considerations by the time she went upstairs to ready herself for bed. When she had changed into her night dress and combed her hair, she moved to the bed and arranged the pillow beneath the covers so that it would appear as though she was in bed sleeping when he came. After checking the bulge from several different angles and adjusting it until she was certain that, in the dark at least, it would fool him, she took the box of Lucifers from her mantel and looked around the room for the best place to lay in wait for him.

He always left by the window, but she was not at all certain that that was the way he came in since she had never heard him. Even the night before when she had lay waiting for him, she had not known that he was there until she had felt his presence next to her.

Finally, she decided the window was the best option. If he came in through the door, she would very likely miss her chance, but she did not think that he was coming in that way.

Moving to a corner near the windows with her matches and her candle, she blew the candle out and waited, ticking off the minutes in heartbeats. The house settled, creaking as the old timbers cooled in the evening air. Below her, she could hear her brother and his guests from time to time. Time seemed to drag, recorded only in her discomfort. Her mind had begun to drift when she heard footsteps coming up the stairs. She tensed, listening intently, relaxing in disappointment as the steps faded toward the other wing. After what seemed a very long time, she heard more footsteps and voices as two of the other guests retired for the evening. She thought one of the men was Lord Cleeves, but she could not be entirely certain.

She shifted after a while, wondering if the others intended to go up to bed at all.

Another thirty minutes, or perhaps an hour passed and her mind began to wander again to random thoughts. The faint scraping sound did not even register at first. When she had begun her vigil, she had jumped at every creak and groan of the old house, certain each time that it was a footstep.

Abruptly, however, she sensed that she was no longer alone in the room. Panic surged through her as she fumbled with the match and box, striking it twice before she managed to connect the sulfer tip with the flint. The match flared abruptly, blinding her.

“Curiosity killed the cat,” he murmured, both amusement and anger threading his voice as he blew the match out.

A shiver traced its way down her spine. “You wouldn’t really hurt me?” she asked a little breathlessly.

A hand closed over her wrist and jerked her from the corner where she had hidden. She collided with a hard chest, felt a hand tangle in her hair, tugging her head back. His breath brushed her lips. “If you can believe nothing else,” he murmured as his lips

brushed hers, "believe that I never truly meant to harm you." His mouth covered hers then and he thrust his tongue past the barrier of her lips. Her body responded instantly to the lure of pleasure. Dropping the candle stick and matches, she shifted closer, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him back with yearning, in welcome, with apology.

He pulled away after a moment, bending to scoop her up and carry her to the bed. When he had settled her on the mattress, she came up on her knees to remove her nightgown, staring at his shadowy form as he stripped his own clothes off, wishing he had allowed her to light the candle so that she could see him.

She forgot the disappointment and her anxieties as he made love to her with fervent need until she cried out in release, and then before she had scarcely caught her breath began again, more slowly, but insistently until he had taken her to the heights again and again and she finally fell into the welcome oblivion of exhausted, sated bliss.

* * * *

As exhausted as he was from making love to Melantha, Ransom found that he was still wide awake, tense. He lay staring at the ceiling for a while longer, enjoying the feel of her lying limply across his chest, stroking his hand along her silky hair and the equally smooth skin of her back. The thoughts that had been teasing at the back of his mind crept in insidiously, refusing to be ignored.

He had heaped crime upon crime and he knew it had to stop, knew he had to stop. He had accepted that before he had come tonight, thought he had barricaded himself safely behind a wall of determination.

And it had crumpled to dust at his feet the very moment she had thrown her arms around him and kissed him in welcome.

He had never thought of himself as a weak man, but he had no resistance where Mellie was concerned.

He realized, now, that he had been a fool to think that he could come out of this unscathed. He should have known from the moment she had set his blood on fire that the passion he felt that was so much more intense than anything he had ever felt before was not something to be taken lightly, that it would not be easily quenched.

He had begun to realize that it could not be satisfied at all, for the more he came, the more he wanted.

And he had dug himself a grave, walked blindly into self-destruction before he had even realized the danger. It was beyond useless to wish he had not done what he had, to wish he could take it back, go back and start again.

He did not think he had fully realized how deep a hole he had dug for himself until he had come to her the night before and she had turned to him at long last, because he did not realize until she had that he had been waiting and hoping that she would, wanting

her to acknowledge him as more than a stranger who slaked her desire.

Yet, the very moment she had asked his name, it had crashed down on him with the finality of a falling avalanche of rocks just how thoroughly he had botched things, because his mind had filled instantly with all the repercussions that would follow.

He had to wonder now how he could have been so caught up in his grief and anger and his pursuit of revenge that he had been blinded to just how heinous his actions were.

He could not undo what he had done, but just as surely he had to stop and do no more harm. He had enjoyed the luck of the truly stupid so far, but he knew that the odds were against him. Every time he came, the risks, both to her and to himself, increased. The thought was enough to make his gut clench, not from fear, but from resistance, even now, to the thought of giving her up before he was dragged away from her.

For her sake, if not his own, he had to leave and not look back. He had taken her virginity and, god help him, he was fiercely glad of it, but the harm was not beyond repairing. She could still find a husband if he left her reputation in tact. A man who cared about her would accept whatever lie she invented to cover the loss of her maidenhead.

The thought made him feel sick to his stomach, and he carefully extracted himself and dressed. He stood watching her sleep for many moments when he was done, reluctant to leave, wishing that he dared light a candle so that he could see her, wishing everything that had happened between them had not been sly and furtive when it could easily have been open and honest if he had not been such a complete fool.

Sighing deeply with regret, he turned finally, paused by her vanity and took the diary from his jacket pocket. He stared down at it in his hand for many moments and finally, reluctantly, set it carefully on her vanity and left for the last time by way of the window.

* * * *

Melantha woke with a jarring sense of distress. Her gaze went immediately to the indentation in the pillow next to hers. Without surprise, for the full light of day was spilling into the room, she saw that he was gone. Still vaguely disoriented with sleep, she frowned thoughtfully, trying to decide what had awoken her, and why she had awakened with such a sense of urgency and anxiety.

She had fallen asleep in his arms the night before. He had not simply endured her need to cuddle. He had pulled her tightly against him, held her as if he thought she might try to escape even as she had drifted to sleep.

Was that it, she wondered? Had her subconscious mind feared that he had fallen asleep, as well, and that they risked being found together?

She thought it might have been, but she was not completely satisfied. Trying to shake the troubled feeling, she got out of bed and headed to the washbasin to bathe herself.

She stopped halfway there, as suddenly as if she had hit a stone wall, staring at the book that lay on her vanity with the same sense of horror and dread she would have felt if it had been a serpent.

Slowly, it sank into her mind that it was her diary, and more slowly still the vague sense of dread congealed and the book blurred and a hard knot formed in her chest and throat.

He had been saying goodbye.

Chapter Thirteen

Melantha found that she could not stop crying long enough to get her emotions under control. Every time she thought she had mastered the urge and went to the basin to wash her face, she caught sight of the diary and began to weep all over again.

Finally, she grabbed it up and ripped all the pages from it, tearing them to shreds and tossing them into the fireplace and setting fire to them.

It did not help her feelings one whit that she could tell, and finally she climbed back into bed and cried until she was so exhausted she fell asleep.

Nancy woke her a little later. "Miss Melantha?"

Melantha burrowed her face deeper into her pillow. "What?"

"Are ya not feeling well? Yer grandmother sent me to check on ya."

Melantha muttered the first lie that popped into her mind. "It's my woman's time."

"Poor deary," Nancy murmured sympathetically. "No wonder yer still lyin' abed and it nigh noon. Can I bring ye somethin'?"

Melantha considered it and realized that she could not simply lie in bed all day. Even if her grandmother accepted that she was having difficulties, she could not use that excuse forever. "No thank you," she responded finally. "I am feeling a little better now. I will come down."

Her eyes were swollen and reddened from crying and no amount of splashing water would remove the traces entirely. Giving up after a while, Melantha dressed herself and went downstairs.

Dismay filled her when she discovered that the whole group had decided to gather for luncheon. Striving to behave as if her entire world had not collapsed around her ears that morning, Melantha took her seat, smiling where ever it seemed appropriate. When she finally gathered the nerve to look around the table at her companions, she discovered that both Lord Blackthorne and Sir Knightly were studying her keenly. A muscle worked in Lord Blackthorne's jaw as he met her gaze, but for once he broke the contact, returning his attention to his meal.

"I wonder, perhaps, if you are feeling better after luncheon if you would like to take a ride?" Sir Knightly asked her when she glanced at him.

Her heart skipped a beat, but she was torn instantly, wondering if he was her lover and he had changed his mind. Or, perhaps, he thought that it was time to dispense with subterfuge? A blush mounted her cheeks. Struggling to tamp the thrill of excitement that went through her, she smiled at him warmly. "Thank you. I would like that."

He seemed to relax fractionally, smiling more easily.

"It is so kind of you to take the time to cheer her before you go!" Grandmother put in. "For I think she is already feeling blue at the thought that we will have no company at all after tomorrow."

Melantha's gaze clashed with Lord Blackthorne's as she turned her head to look at her grandmother. The contact was too brief to fully register the look in his eyes, but even as she met her grandmother's gaze she realized the gleam in his eyes was pure, undiluted fury.

"I did not realize that everyone was leaving tomorrow," she said in little more than a choked whisper.

She was not certain what was said after that for her mind was awl with chaotic thoughts and emotions. Her efforts to tamp her excitement were as useless as trying to hold back water with one's hands. It flowed over and around every obstacle she threw in its way, ignored every attempt at reason and sensible thought. In spite of all she could do, the fantasy took root in her mind that he wanted to be alone with her to beg pardon for his behavior, to tell her that he could not bear the thought of living without her and that she must marry him at once.

Even the announcement that everyone was leaving failed to dampen her excitement after that first moment of dismay, for she convinced herself that he would tell her that he was only leaving to post the bands so that they could wed.

She would not make it too easy for him, she decided. He had behaved abominably and he would have to realize that as much as she adored him, she deserved respect. She had succumbed to his wiles, but she was still a lady.

She could scarcely contain herself until the meal had ended and she could leave to change into her riding dress without appearing too eager.

Her hands were shaking so badly by the time she reached her room to change, she knotted every tie and a fine sheen of sweat had dampened her body from wrestling with her clothing. Anxious as she was to hurry to Sir Knightly, who was waiting for her at the stables, she stopped to bathe the perspiration off and dried herself before she began the search for a riding habit that was reasonably new and flattered her.

Never had there been a more useless effort made, for nothing she had was less than three years old and none of it particularly flattered her.

Suppressing the urge to weep, she finally chose the least offensive and struggled into it. Her arms were aching with battling the ties by the time she was dressed. Ignoring it, she

tidied her hair and found the most fetching bonnet she had and tied it under her chin.

She was fairly running by the time she reached the stairs and it took all she could do to adopt a more sedate and ladylike walk when she spied Lord Blackthorne in the hallway below her.

Her heart skipped a beat when she saw the look he bent upon her, but she decided to ignore his disapproval. Plainly, he disliked Sir Knightly, but that was hardly her problem.

He stunned her by catching her arm when she went to move past him. "I credited you with more sense," he ground out.

Melantha gaped at him, and then, as indignation rose in her breast, jerked her arm free. "If grandmother did not disapprove, then you certainly have no right to object," she snapped, stalking toward the door and exiting the house.

Sir Knightly greeted her with a smile and an appreciative glance that she would have found objectionable in anyone else, for he seemed to undress her with his eyes. Instead, however, she warmed beneath his admiring gaze, feeling some of her tension at the unpleasant encounter with Lord Blackthorne ease.

He had already had the groom saddle their horses, and led her to her little mare, helping her to mount before he mounted his own horse. "Shall we follow the path through the woods?" he asked. "Or try for adventure?"

Melantha instantly thought of the quiet little spot along the stream where she sometimes went when she felt the need to be alone with her thoughts, but then she reminded herself that she had determined she would not make things too easy for him. He had been wicked--deliciously so as far as she was concerned--but that did not change the fact that he had treated her dishonorably. He should work to make it up to her.

She smiled. "I am afraid my little Blossom is not too keen on adventure. She is very pig headed about taking the path through the woods."

He eyed the mare with a mixture of amusement and irritation, but finally shrugged. "The path it is."

They had been riding in slightly strained silence for some moments before Melantha managed to prod her mind into producing a subject for conversation. "It is true then? You will be leaving tomorrow?"

"Alas, yes. I must get back."

Melantha tried not to look as disappointed as she was that he had not taken the conversational gambit as an opening to voice his true feelings for her.

"That is not to say that I could not come back, however."

Melantha threw him a tentative smile. "I would like that."

“Would you?”

A faint frown flickered across her expression as she realized the conversation was not going quite as she had imagined it would. He should be professing his sincere regard for her, and apologies, not fishing for her to do so.

Perhaps he was too uncomfortable to take the leap, however? Mayhap he was not certain she would not forgive him and he needed some encouragement, just a little, that she was willing to forgive him?

“Yes, I would.”

He seemed relieved. “I confess I had wondered if your interest was elsewhere.”

Melantha sent him a startled glance.

He shrugged. “Lord Blackthorne has shown a good deal of interest in you himself, and you did not seem ... disinterested.”

“Lord Blackthorne?” Melantha echoed in surprise, casting around in her mind to think what might have given him that idea, for she could not recall that the two of them had exchanged anything more than pleasantries from time to time--except for the few times when they had exchanged unpleasantries and the time he had followed her into the woods to comfort her when she had been distressed by the argument with her grandmother. And then, of course, he had tricked her that one day into drinking the spirits because she had been so distressed and afterward had carried her to her room to rest, something she had needed very badly at the time. But then no one had been about to witness those embarrassing moments that she had known of. “You think that he has shown an interest in me?”

He shrugged, smiling wryly. “Enough, at any rate, to give me the distinct impression that he did not take kindly to my interest in you.”

“Oh,” Melantha said thoughtfully, remembering abruptly that she had noticed that, as well. She had been certain, though, that the animosity was something between the two men and had little or nothing to do with her. He had certainly made no attempt to fix her interest in him--beyond the kindness he had given her and refused to acknowledge as kindness. “I am certain you must be mistaken,” she added after a few moments, feeling strangely mixed feelings over it--flattered, pleased, unnerved, and disappointed all at the same time.

He was quiet devastatingly handsome, but he was also very unnerving and she could not recall that he had looked at her at any time only with admiration. There had been several times when she thought that he had gazed at her with both admiration and disapproval, as if he did not like that he found her the least attractive.

“Perhaps he sees himself in the role of big brother? He has been friends with your brother for awhile as I understand it?”

The questioning lilt to the statement was unmistakable, but she found that she did not particularly like the suggestion that he only felt a brotherly sort of protectiveness toward her. She shrugged, trying to shake the disturbing thoughts Sir Knightly had introduced into her mind. "Perhaps," she said after a moment. "Though I have not met him before he came here with all of you."

Sir Knightly looked surprised at that, but allowed the subject to drop. "Well, I must see if I can prevail upon Rupert to invite me to visit again so that we can get the chance to know one another better."

Melantha blushed with pleasure at that, promptly dismissing Lord Blackthorne from her mind. It was not precisely a declaration, and not what she had anticipated, but she curbed her disappointment with the realization that he was determined to woo her, in spite of everything, as he should have done to begin with. "I will look forward to it with pleasure."

He sent her a teasing glance that warmed her clear down to her toes. "Shall we dismount and walk a bit?" he suggested. "I am in no great hurry to return to the house."

Realizing abruptly that they had made the circuit of the trail while they talked, and that they were indeed on the return path, Melantha nodded. When he had climbed down and helped her to dismount, he took the reins of both horses to lead them and they walked slowly shoulder to shoulder. "You should prevail upon your brother to bring you to London for the season," he said after a moment. "I would delight in showing you the sights since I know you have not yet had the opportunity to visit the city."

"I would enjoy that!" Melantha said, breathless with joy at the thought of being escorted around London by him.

He stopped abruptly, turning to face her and lifting his hand. Melantha sucked in her breath, tensing with excitement and anticipation. Instead of caressing her cheek, however, he flicked a leaf from the brim of her bonnet.

Blushing at her misapprehension, she looked away. She had already taken another step down the path when he caught her hand. She looked at him questioningly, but she did not argue as he glanced around and then dropped the reins of the horses, dragging her behind him and into the clearing near the stream where she had first considered taking him. Surprised but pleased, she turned to him as he dropped her hand.

He caught her even as she turned, pulling her up against his body.

She had already relaxed against him when a warning bell began to clang inside her head. She knew even before his mouth covered hers that she had blundered, badly.

Nothing about him felt the least bit familiar, not his lips, not the taste or texture of his mouth and tongue, not the way he kissed her, not his scent and certainly not the feel of his arms or his body. Dismayed at her mistake, repulsed by the carnal need she felt in his kiss, Melantha braced her palms against his chest and tried to thrust him away, her heart

thundering in her ears with distress and embarrassment, not excitement.

He resisted her push, his arms tightening. She made a sound of objection into his mouth, struggling harder, vaguely alarmed and dismayed by his strength. Anger surged through her abruptly, giving her strength to tear her mouth from his and thrust him away.

She glared at him, her breasts heaving with anger so that it was several moments before she realized that what she was hearing was more than the thundering pounding of her heart in her ears. It was hoof beats along the path.

Wondering if something had startled the horses, Melantha glanced toward the sound.

Lord Blackthorne, she discovered, was riding toward them, his face as black as thunder. She felt her jaw drop. For several panicked moments she wondered if he meant to run them down. He pulled the horse up abruptly, however, as he reached them and virtually leapt from the saddle. His stride was as furious as his expression as he closed the distance between them.

Sir Knightly gave him a cold look, flicking at an imaginary speck on his pristine jacket. "I hate to say it, old fellow, but you are a trifle de trop. Mellie and I were just getting to know one another a little better."

Uttering a snarl, Lord Blackthorne drew back his fist and slammed it into Sir Knightly's jaw so hard he flew backwards toward the ground, hitting it and sliding several feet before he stopped. Melantha took a step back when he turned on her. "Woman! Are you hell bent on destroying your reputation?" he growled furiously.

Melantha gaped at him, feeling her face redden as she realized guiltily that her lips were throbbing from the kiss. Even if he had not seen it, he could have no doubt of what he had interrupted between them.

He turned and glanced at Sir Knightly, who had struggled upright and was supporting himself with one arm while he tested his jaw for breaks. "He is the worst braggart in all of London regarding his conquests," he snarled, pointing a shaking finger at the man who was struggling to get to his feet. "No self-respecting female will even be seen his company, for to do so is certain ruin."

Melantha glanced from Lord Blackthorne's furious face to Sir Knightly, too shocked to think of anything at all to say.

Without a word, Lord Blackthorne caught her hand and dragged her back to the path. Grasping her waist when they reached her mare, he lifted her up and plunked her down on her saddle so hard it jarred the teeth in her head. Snatching the reins up, he placed them in her hands. "Go home, Mellie," he growled.

Since he punctuated the order by slapping her mare on the rump and Blossom, completely unaccustomed to such an indignity, let out a shriek of surprise and fear, and instantly launched herself into a breakneck trot--gallop obviously being something that was beyond her capabilities--that made Melantha bite her tongue, she had little choice.

But she looked back in dismay as the mare trotted past Sir Knightly, recovered from the blow and looking every bit as murderous as Lord Blackthorne, who was stalking down the path to meet the man who had marred his beautiful countenance with an ugly bruise.

“Swords or pistols?” Lord Blackthorne asked coldly, sending a shaft of terror through Melantha.

“Fists!” Sir Knightly snarled, launching himself forward and throwing a punch at Lord Blackthorne. The blow swung Lord Blackthorne’s head to one side, but otherwise did not move him one inch or even seem to faze him. He turned to look at Sir Knightly again, rubbing his jaw. His eyes blazing with both fury and savage pleasure, he balled his hand into a fist and hit Sir Knightly with two short jabs in the face, which she missed seeing since Blossom took that inconvenient moment to round a curve in the trail, but which she heard when it connected.

She was still white faced with shock when she arrived at the stables. The stable hands, who had gathered to stare toward the meaty sounds of blows and grunts of pain and effort filtering through the woods gaped at her as Blossom trotted past them and headed for the barn, ignoring every effort on Melantha’s part to rein her in.

It was just as well, for it gave Melantha a few moments to collect herself. Slipping from the saddle, she managed to lock her watery knees just in time to keep from sprawling in the mud, straw, and horse manure that littered the floor. She was already half way back to the house when she happened to look back and saw Lord Blackthorne appear on the path.

Her heart leapt into her throat as she caught his gaze, sending a shot of horror driven adrenaline through her that lent a much needed surge of strength. Struggling to refrain from looking as if she was fleeing, which she was, she hurried into the house and virtually raced up the stairs, slamming her door behind her and locking it.

She spent most of the afternoon quaking in her room, expecting any moment to receive a summons from her grandmother--or worse, her grandmother and Rupert. When no summons came, she paced the floor a while, trying to come to grips with what had happened. Her dismay and disappointment at discovering that Sir Knightly was not the man she had thought he was paled to insignificance beside what had come after, however, and she was too horrified to realize that she had very nearly precipitated a duel to face that.

Chagrined, she realized finally why Lord Blackthorne had tried to subtly shift her attentions from Sir Knightly, who was certain not at all knightly! With painful clarity she recalled his comment as she had left that he had credited her with more sense.

Well, quite obviously she had none! She had proven that to herself and everyone else!

Grandmother, she discovered, when she finally gathered the nerve to go downstairs late that evening, was seated in the small parlor looking very pleased with herself. More than

a little stunned, Melantha moved quietly into the room and took a seat across from her. The smirk vanished when Melantha had settled. "Feeling better, my dear?"

Melantha blinked at her grandmother. "Yes, thank you," she responded finally.

"Did you enjoy your ride?"

Melantha felt her color fluctuate. She cleared her throat. "Yes," she lied weakly.

"I thought as much. Your color is much better."

Feeling very much as if she had stumbled into the wrong house, Melantha took up her basket after a few moments and occupied herself until they were called to dinner.

Sir Knightly and Lord Blackthorne were conspicuous by their absence. Since Rupert sent her a condemning glance, however, she decided not to comment upon it. Both Lord Cleeves and Sir Johns, who were present, appeared to be laboring to behave in a subdued manner out of consideration for the fact that Rupert looked as if he was spoiling for a fight. She could not doubt that they had both learned of the fight in the woods and were dying to discuss it in detail, but they managed to muddle through dinner without broaching the subject, or anything that might touch upon it.

She retired to her room as soon as reasonably acceptable after dinner, still expecting that Rupert would call her to account and read her a lecture on proper behavior. It was a relief, therefore, when she went down the next morning to find that the hall was full of luggage.

When they had left, she took a walk into the woods, sat down by the stream and wept until she was sure she had no more tears to weep for the lover who had sneaked into her bed chamber at night, and into her heart, and then abandoned her.

She realized that she had wanted to believe that it was Sir Knightly or she would not have been such easy prey for him.

It occurred to her to wonder if he would boast of conquest even when he had not succeeded in doing anything more than stealing a kiss, but it hardly seemed to matter. She had gotten her diary back and burned it, but she felt no better at all.

She discovered that she had not wept all her tears, for it took next to nothing to set her off all over again. For weeks she dragged herself out of bed, dressed, and went about her daily routine with no idea of where she was or what she was doing.

Finally, when it had begun to seem as if her grief would consume her, Grandmother decided that she had had 'quite enough long faces and moping' and read her a furious lecture that sent her to her room to weep again. This time, however, when she had cried herself to sleep and woke feeling as if someone had beaten her up, she had the lecture to think about and she realized that her grandmother was right. Life went on. She had to drag herself up whether she wanted to or not, and live. It was up to her whether she lived enjoying life, or being beat down by it.

And she should not even want to grieve herself into the grave over a man who had cared nothing about her.

She did, but she did not think she was going to. And, in any case, she did not want people talking about her pityingly as the spinster who had been foolish enough to fall for a man who cared nothing about her and then had compounded her foolishness by going into a decline.

She had no idea how Grandmother had figured out that she was in mourning over her lover, but she was fairly certain that her grandmother had no idea just how very stupidly she had behaved or she would have taken a cane to her.

She should count her blessings that at least no one would ever know.

That statement came back to haunt Melantha as optimism so often did.

Chapter Fourteen

Having come through two of the worst months of her entire life, Melantha finally managed to find some peace and began to take an interest in life once more when the holidays rolled around. It had always been her most favorite time of the year and she threw her whole heart into it, helping the servants to clean the old house until it shone and then dragging in boughs of holly to decorate. She had little to spend on gifts, but she busied herself making 'secret' gifts for everyone.

It was not until after the holidays that it finally dawned upon Melantha that she had not had her menses, once, since she had allowed the stranger into her bed. She was certain, at first, that she had to be mistaken, but try though she might she could not recall having had a cycle at all for months.

She felt sick to her stomach when she realized that the stranger's 'protective' measures had not done her any good at all, because the very first time they had coupled, he had gotten her with child.

Clearly, providence was out to get her.

She wept over it a while and raged for a while, but it did no more good than the weeping and breast beating of before. Her lover did not come back, but he had left her a token of his affection that was going to finish off what he had begun.

For a while she was too terrified even to think what to do beyond try to hide the evidence as she had burned the diary and her torn and bloodied night gown. She did not even know the father's name, let alone any way at all of contacting him, or if he would help her even if she did, by some miracle, figure out who he was and where he was. And she had virtually no money at all of her own.

She could not stay at Remington Manor. She knew that much. Her grandmother would kill her if she found out that she was with child, or keel over dead herself.

She would have to go away--somewhere.

Her first thought was 'home'. She felt excited and enthusiastic about it for a little while, until she realized that there was no home, and no family. She supposed she still had friends. And Italy was so far away, perhaps she could invent a story of being widowed and then she would not be a pariah.

Not that she would have the wherewithal to go about in society anyway, but it would have to be better than staying in England and being despised, and her child despised.

It was still the most frightening thing she had ever considered doing in her life, but she could not see that she had a choice. That being the case, she sat down to write to the solicitor to find out if she could afford passage and the purchase or lease of a small cottage in or near the town where she had lived before and waited impatiently to receive a response, wondering what she would do if he told her she did not have the money she needed.

She did not have time for indecision. By her calculations, she was more than two months along and Grandmother had already commented on the fact that she had overindulged during the holidays and was going to run to fat if she was not very careful.

Every day that passed was another day closer to disaster, and Melantha finally took to going for long rides regardless of the miserable weather, for it was the only way that she could escape from her grandmother's piercing observation for a little while.

It was late in January when Melantha returned from her ride one day to discover an unfamiliar carriage outside. Since the last thing she wanted was to be trapped into entertaining any of her grandmother's guests, she entered the house as quietly as she could and tiptoed toward the stairs.

"... It is so kind of you to ask. She is doing very well, thank you. The picture of health. In fact, I remarked only recently that she is getting as plump and round as a pumpkin, so I can not complain that she has taken to riding"

Melantha froze, cringing when she heard her grandmother. God alone knew what gossipy old dragon she was relating that information to, but it would certainly be damning when she 'plumped up' and then disappeared abruptly.

She had managed no more than to set the toe of her riding boot on the stairs when she heard the words she had dreaded. "And there she is! Come, Melantha dear. You must meet our new neighbor who has come to call and pay his respects."

"I will just freshen up, then, and be down in a trice," she tried with false cheer.

"Oh! Do not be silly. Come and say hello, at least, and then you can dash up to change."

Sighing, Melantha yielded to the inevitable and trudged toward the door of the small parlor.

She froze when she crossed the threshold and met the penetrating gaze of the man standing before the hearth warming himself, the false smile of friendly welcome slowly

congealing on her lips.

His gaze flickered over her face, dropped to her breasts and lingered there for several moments, and then dropped to her waist, where the darkened seams where she had let the riding dress out made it readily apparent how bountifully she was 'plumping up'.

His face took on the same hue as his pristine cravat as his gaze darted upward once more and fixed upon her face. "Lord Blackthorne! What a pleasant surprise," Melantha managed to murmur, feeling as if her lips had lost all coordination.

She watched his throat work as he swallowed. "Miss Melantha," he managed to say finally, his voice sounding strange even to Melantha's ears and she was nigh deaf from the frantic pounding of her heart against her eardrums. "The pleasure is mine," he finished as he surged forward to take her cold hand in his and brush his lips lightly across the back. He frowned, retaining her hand. "You are half frozen. You should come to the fire and warm up."

"When I have freshened up," she repeated vaguely. "I smell of the stables."

"Posh!" Grandmother exclaimed. "Oh, very well. Run up and change, but do not dawdle, for I am certain that Lord Blackthorne did not come only to listen to the prattle of an old woman!"

Murmuring that he found her company both delightful and charming in a wooden voice, Lord Blackthorne moved a little stiffly to the nearest chair and collapsed into it. Feeling very much as if she was sleep walking, Melantha turned and made her way upstairs, keenly aware that Lord Blackthorne watched her until she vanished from his sight.

She was still in a state of shock when she reached her room, but one thing seemed horribly apparent. He was shocked at her appearance and must have guessed her condition.

No doubt he was thinking that his gallant championing of her was a bit behind hand!

She felt like weeping with vexation! If her grandmother had not brought it to his attention before she had even gone into the room, it seemed doubtful that he would have noticed. He had not seen her for months, after all.

She had not realized how much she valued his opinion until she had seen the look of horror on his face.

She did not want to go down again, but she could not bring herself to snub him.

Curbing the urge to cry, she undressed angrily and went to bathe in the basin before she changed. It was becoming harder and harder to find any dresses at all that were not too tight somewhere--generally everywhere. Her bosom was blossoming almost as rapidly as her waistline. Finally settling on the loosest dress she could find, an ugly brown thing that she had always thought most unbecoming, she dressed and tidied her hair.

Lord Blackthorne was pacing restlessly before the hearth when she reached the small

parlor again, tapping his hat impatiently against his thigh. Taken aback to discover that he was preparing to leave, Melantha checked on the threshold for a moment and finally crossed the room to sit.

Grandmother looked the dress over disapprovingly.

Melantha blushed.

“Lord Blackthorne has been telling me that he has bought the place that marches with our western boundary,” Grandmother prompted. “Is that not quite wonderful? For we have not had neighbors since we moved here.”

Melantha managed a smile. “Yes! That is wonderful news. I have always thought that it was sad to see such a lovely place left to molder...uh... oh dear. What I meant to say is abandoned when it simply begs for a family.”

Lord Blackthorne’s gaze promptly dropped to Melantha’s waistline again and she shifted uncomfortably. “Precisely my thoughts,” he said smoothly, ignoring her blunder. “When I visited here, I rode over to have a look at it and decided to buy it. It’s in a shocking state just now, I’m afraid, but it has potential.”

“So you will be moving your family in when you have finished renovating it?” Grandmother asked, without any subtlety whatsoever.

He smiled thinly. “Alas, no, since at the moment I do not have one.”

“Oh,” Grandmother said, trying to look distressed for him. “What a pity!”

“I had driven over with the thought that you might care to have a look at the place, Miss Melantha. It is not much to look at just now, I’m afraid, and filled with workers, but I would welcome any pointers you might like to give me on renovating the place with an eye to eventually filling the lofty old place with a family.”

Melantha gaped at him.

“That is a marvelous idea! She has been moping around for months, if you must know! I had begun to despair of the girl ... and she is still not entirely her old self. A project is the very thing to cheer her up! Don’t you agree, Melantha?”

Melantha wanted to sink through the floor. “I would be delighted to look, my lord, but I must confess I haven’t a notion of what you might want and I do not feel at all qualified to voice my opinion on such things.”

His smile was slightly strained. “Then you need not voice an opinion if you are not comfortable doing so. Perhaps you will allow me to show around anyway?”

Distressed as she was at the thought of being alone in the carriage with Lord Blackthorne all the way to his place and back again, Melantha nevertheless felt that politeness required a gracious acceptance of his invitation and left to find a cloak suitable for the carriage ride.

She sat tensely beside him for a time, bundled beneath her cloak and the lap robe he had brought to keep her warm, but finally decided that she owed him an expression of gratitude for rescuing her on that never to be sufficiently regretted day when he had come upon Sir Knightly kissing her. After glancing at his stony face several times, she finally took the leap. "I never did get to thank you for ... uh ... rescuing me the day that ... uh ... when Sir Knightly took liberties he should not have."

"Did he?"

Melantha gaped at him. "Did he what?"

"You did not give him reason to believe that you welcomed his kisses?"

Feeling very much as if she had just been slapped, Melantha retreated into stunned silence for several moments, wavering between indignation and a strong sense of guilt. She had not led him to believe that she would be averse to his attentions. Chastened, she studied the passing scenery for a few moments. "He was not the man I thought he was," she said finally. "And by the time I realized my mistake" She trailed off, wondering why she had even tried to explain, for of course she could not say that he really was not the man she had thought he was, because it would certainly sound far worse.

Guilt? Because he had almost gotten into a duel over her and now wondered if she had had virtue to protect?

And she had not, for she had long since given up all claim to any virtue at all, but she could not tell him that. He did not know about her condition, and she found that she could not bear the thought of how he would perceive her if he did. He might suspect. She thought he did, but that was still a far cry from knowing and she held out some hope that she would hear something favorable from the solicitor and then no one would ever know.

Looking oddly pleased, he seemed to relax fractionally. "He did not take advantage of you?" he asked flatly.

Stunned, Melantha could only stare at him while color climbed into her cheeks. "No," she said finally, relieved that at least that was not a lie. "You have a very low opinion of me."

He glanced at her and she was surprised to see uncertainty in his expression. "As it happens, I do not," he said finally. "Jealousy is not a very rational emotion, however."

Melantha felt her heart flutter uncomfortably at that. After a moment, she realized that it was hopefulness and pleasure that had caused it. "You are ... were jealous?" she asked in surprise. "Oh! You are teasing me!"

His lips twisted wryly. "Am," he said bluntly. "Unfortunately not."

Melantha digested that in silence for the remainder of the trip for she was not at all certain of how she felt about it beyond stunned. Sir Knightly had suggested that Lord

Blackthorne was interested in her, but she had not credited it. She found it hard to credit even now. Casting her mind back, she realized that he had always been studying her when she had happened to look at him, but she had thought it was with disapproval. He had caught her in his room rifling through his things, after all. It still sent shivers down her spine whenever she recalled the incident.

She had thought he had only spoken so suggestively to her because he had meant to scare her--and he had, but it had also thrilled her to her toes when she had thought he would take her into his arms forcefully and steal a kiss and she had been very disappointed that he had simply 'warned' her and let her go.

Then, too, he had always seemed to be near by when ever something awful had happened, and she had thought that that was purely bad luck. It made her feel strange to think that he had been watching her because he had thought her a desirable woman, and not at all in a bad way. "I thought you disapproved of me," she said finally.

He glanced at her as he slowed the carriage to make the turn through the gates. "Dear Rupert, yes. You, no. I have always thought he was irresponsible, but I had not realized that he could be such a damnably irresponsible sod as to invite the worst rakes in London to his country estate while his sister was in residence."

Melantha could not help but smile at his reference to 'dear' Rupert. "But I had you to look out for me," she said.

He reddened, threw her an unfathomable glance and looked away again, frowning. "I was the worst wolf in the pack, Mellie," he finally said.

Melantha looked at him askance, but as they pulled to a stop just then, Lord Blackthorne climbed down and rounded the carriage to help her down. She looked up at the house as he did so, a little surprised to see there were indeed workers moving about the place very busily.

"You have done so much already!" she said in surprise as he led her up the steps.

She looked up at him smilingly as they reached the entrance. "I have always wanted to explore this place but did not quite dare," she told him confidentially.

He smiled back at her. "Now you have the owner's permission to explore to your heart's desire."

She was surprised to discover that the house was quite comfortable, for there were fires blazing on every hearth. "You are no staying here yet?"

"Not yet. I have a room at the inn for now."

Glancing around the front parlor as they entered it, she frowned. "You will be very tired of the inn, I expect, long before this is finished."

"That much is certain," he said dryly. "For I am heartily sick of it already."

“Where did you live before?” she asked curiously.

He shrugged. “Here and there.”

“Oh! I do beg your pardon! I should not have been so nosey, I don’t suppose.”

“Many places,” he supplied. “No where for very long.”

“Truly?”

“Truly.”

“I always thought that I should like to travel,” she said meditively. “Do you think that you will be satisfied to stay in one place when you are accustomed to change?”

He studied her for a long moment. “I will grow accustomed.”

She looked up at him doubtfully from the mantel piece she had been studying. “Do you really think so? I would think that would be very hard. I hated it here when we first came. I longed to go home.”

He followed her as she crossed the front parlor and peered into the room beyond. “This is your home now.”

She glanced at him blankly and finally smiled when she realized he was referring to England. “I suppose. Actually, I have been thinking a very great deal lately about going back to Italy. That’s where I lived when I was growing up.”

He was silent for so long that she glanced at him. “What does Rupert have to say about that? He is your guardian.”

Melantha frowned wondering if she had said too much, but finally shrugged. She did not think that she could sneak off in the dead of night, regardless of the circumstances. It would be better, she thought, if she tried to accustom Rupert and grandmother to the idea. “I will reach my majority next month. I am not certain how he will feel about it, but he can not stop me.”

Assuming, of course, that she had enough money of her own to pay her way.

“Then we will have to try to persuade you to stay.”

Melantha looked away, feeling her enthusiasm over the beauty of the place wane. It was so terribly tempting to think that he might actually be interested enough in her to want to try to persuade her, but she could not encourage that train of thought--in either him or herself. Her situation was hopeless. If she had not been so far gone with child already, she might have been more than tempted.

She had finally accepted that her lover was gone forever. She still grieved over it. She was not certain that she would ever entirely recover, but she had always thought Lord Blackthorne dangerously attractive. It would be so very easy to yield to that attraction, to turn to him for comfort and the affection he seemed to be hinting very strongly that he was offering.

He would not want her, though, once he realized that she was a fallen woman. He had said himself that he was jealous. He seemed to feel something for her, but he could not love her and if he did not then how could he accept and forgive? And if he could not, then there would be no chance at all for love to grow, none for respect even, and what sort of life would that be? To be married to a man who despised her and would probably loathe the sight of her child?

Unconsciously, she dropped her hand to her rounding belly, stroking it, as if to comfort the unborn child.

Strangely enough, it comforted her, considering its existence threatened her own. She had found that she could not help but love it already, though. "Rupert is far too ham handed to be the least persuasive," she said laughingly. "He will only roar and bluster as he always does and then he will go off and forget about it, certain that I would not dare to go against him."

"He does not know you very well, does he?" Lord Blackthorne commented wryly.

Melantha reddened, fairly certain that that was not a compliment. "We have never been close. He is ten years my senior."

To her surprise, Lord Blackthorne's face darkened. "That precludes closeness?" he asked coolly.

"Oh dear! I am as ham handed as Rupert! I did not mean it the way you took it," she said quickly, realizing that Lord Blackthorne must be somewhere around Rupert's age, perhaps even a few years older, though it was hard to be certain. He seemed far more mature and responsible than Rupert, to be sure--no difficult task. And then, too, it seemed to her that Rupert's wild lifestyle had aged him in appearance beyond his years. Lord Blackthorne did not have that dissipated look, whatever he had said about being "the worst wolf of the pack", but somehow he seemed more worldly than Rupert, which made her think that he had had more experience of life and was probably a few years Rupert's senior. "I only meant that when we were children the age difference made it impossible for any sort of companionship. And we have not grown closer since, I suppose because we are so different. Grandmother has always said that I was very much like my mother, and Rupert like father, and I have wondered how they managed to rub along together, for Rupert and I do not get on well and never have."

"There were only the two of you?" he asked curiously, taking her arm and leading her to the next room, a dining room large enough to seat a sizable dinner party.

"No others that I remember. There was a brother and two more sisters between us, but they contracted a fever when I was little more than a toddler and succumbed. Rupert was away at school at the time, but they had expected that I would die as the others did, for I contracted the fever, as well, and I was the youngest."

He smiled faintly. "As I suggested--You are stronger than you look."

“As to that, I am no dainty miss.”

His gaze moved over her face. “I always hate to disagree with a lady, but I fear I must point out that I am a far better judge of that. I held you in my arms.”

Melantha sent him a startled look, and then reddened when she recalled the time he had carried her into her room. “It is most unchivalrous of you to bring that up.”

“But then I do not profess to be a gentleman, and I have a fondness for the memory.”

Since she did not know how to respond to that, she didn’t.

She enjoyed the tour. As badly in need of repairs as many of the rooms were, it had been a well built structure when it was constructed and the repairs needed were primarily cosmetic. He did not prompt her for pointers, but she caught herself enthusiastically admiring the architectural features of each room.

“Do you know anything about the history of the place?” she asked him when he had helped her into the carriage and turned the horses toward Remington Manor.

“It was a part of the Remington Estate at one time. The dower house of ... one of the brides.”

He seemed reluctant to say more, or perhaps knew no more, and she allowed the subject to drop.

“Won’t you come in for refreshment and to warm yourself before you go back?” she asked when they drew up in front of the manor again.

“Tempted as I am, I don’t like to leave the horses standing long in the cold,” he responded.

Melantha was a little surprised to discover that she was disappointed. She smiled with an effort. “I won’t insist then. Thank you so much for inviting me to see your house. I enjoyed it very much and ... and I hope that we will be seeing much more of you now that we are neighbors.”

His eyes gleamed with amusement. “Indeed you will. This evening, in point of fact, for your grandmother was kind enough to invite me to dine.”

“Well then,” Melantha said as she crossed the threshold and entered the house, more than a little disconcerted at the discovery. “I will look forward to it.”

She found to her dismay that she did look forward to it. As hard as she tried to tamp her enthusiasm, though, she could not. Nor could she completely convince herself that the only reason she was excited was because it was such a rare treat to have company for dinner.

He was a charming man when he put himself out to charm--and he had done that--sophisticated, and possessed of that air of dangerous predator that was so very hard for a female to resist. Those traits, when combined with an extremely appealing face and

excellent physique, were disastrous to the female heart, most particularly to a female already suffering from low self-esteem because she had been abandoned by her lover.

She was far too susceptible to him. If she was not very careful, she knew, he would break her heart all over again and it had only just begun to mend from the time before.

Chapter Fifteen

In spite of all her warnings to herself, Melantha spent the time after Lord Blackthorne had left her frantically working on alterations on one of her favorite evening gowns. The look he gave her when he arrived made the weariness, the aching back and throbbing, sore fingers from dozens of needle pricks worth while.

Since Grandmother had stirred herself to make certain the cook prepared a meal suitable for company, they were all in very good spirits by the time they retired to the parlor.

Lord Blackthorne did not linger long over his after dinner port and cigar, and joined them in the parlor as Melantha began by limbering her fingers with a practice piece. Settling on the bench beside her, Lord Blackthorne gave her a questioning look. "May I? It has been years, but I was tolerable at this at one time."

Surprised, Melantha nodded and scooted down a little to give him more room.

Watching as he placed his hands on the keyboard and sounded out the notes, Melantha found herself entranced by his hands. As large as they were, they were still slender and graceful, his fingers long and tapering, not boxy, thick, and blunt as so many men's were.

It was supposed to be a sign of excellent breeding, but her mind was not on his lineage so much as the breeding part. It stirred her blood to watch the nimble dexterity of his fingers and hands, conjuring forbidden images in her mind of those hands caressing her body.

He struck a sour note, winced, and stopped abruptly, dragging Melantha's attention from his hands. For a handful of heartbeats their gazes met and Melantha knew that it had been her rapt fascination with his hands that had distracted him, for there was a matching warmth in his eyes.

She looked away with an effort.

"I am out of practice," he said, his voice faintly rough.

"You play beautifully," Melantha disputed. "I think that I have distracted you."

His hand settled over hers when she would have risen and moved away. "Stay," he said quietly. "I will endeavor to focus upon the music and not the beautiful nymph by my side."

Melantha blushed, but thanked him for the compliment. "Will you play that again? What you were playing? I have not heard it before."

He played, this time flawlessly and Melantha did her best not to stare at his hands, partly to keep from distracting him but mostly because she found she could not do so without feeling breathless. “What was that?” she asked somewhat dreamily when he had finished.

“A waltz. They are all the rage now.”

Grandmother snorted inelegantly. “So I have heard. Every generation of young people seems to feel that they must push the boundaries of propriety beyond the limits of the generation before. I have heard that the dance is not generally accepted and it is quite scandalous.”

Lord Blackthorne, who had turned to face her when she spoke, smiled faintly. “I was primarily referring to the music, but if you would like, and Miss Melantha does not object, I would be happy to demonstrate the dance with your granddaughter and allow you to observe and judge for yourself.”

Melantha bit her lip to keep from smiling.

To her surprise, her grandmother chuckled at his audacious offer, and moreover, called his bluff. “I suppose as I am unlikely to see it otherwise, but I am afraid you will have to accompany yourself, for I do not play.”

Lord Blackthorne bowed and rose, taking Melantha’s hand and leading her to the open area of the room. She knew the moment she met his gaze that he had not been the least surprised that her grandmother had responded as she had to the challenge in his statement. He had fully expected that she would.

Releasing her hand, he demonstrated the steps first. A little surprised to discover that they were actually very simple, Melantha followed without any trouble at all. Nodding his approval, he took her left hand and guided it to his shoulder and settled his hand along her waist, drawing her closer as he instructed her to lay her palm in his left hand.

Warmth cascaded through Melantha at his nearness. His hand, settled in the crook of her waist along her hip, seemed to burn through her clothing, but his palm against hers was far more distracting, and the rise and fall of his breath in his chest, the nearness of his face to hers, and the combined, heady scents of man, and soap, port and cigars that, warmed by his body, teased her senses.

“Ready?” he asked, his voice husky.

Swallowing with an effort, Melantha nodded jerkily and he began to hum the tune he had played, guiding her slowly through the steps at first and then more quickly until she had begun to feel faint and breathless, both from his nearness and the whirling motions of the dance.

She thought for several panicked moments when he stopped that she would faint, for the room continued to spin around her for a moment before it righted itself.

He looked down at her in frowning concern as she swayed. With an effort, she smiled and moved away, settling on the edge of the sofa.

“I can certainly see why it is considered so scandalous!” Grandmother said tartly. “Why it is almost an ... embrace!”

Lord Blackthorne chuckled. His eyes were dancing with mischievous amusement when he glanced at the old woman. “I am fairly certain that is the appeal--for the men, at least.”

His smile faded as he glanced at Melantha’s pale face again, his dark brows drawing together. “You are unwell,” he said flatly. Melantha glanced at him. “Oh no! I am quite all right,” she murmured even as she discovered the room was fading to darkness around her.

The next thing she became aware of was a hard shoulder beneath her cheek and the sensation of movement. Stirring, she lifted her eyelids to discover her nose was pressed against whiteness.

“You are wearing your stays far too tight, Mellie, if a simple dance can knock you for a loop,” Lord Blackthorne whispered near her ear, his voice harsh with censure. His breath against her ear sent a shiver through her.

She closed her eyes as he turned from the stairs toward her room and another wave of dizziness assailed her. “Don’t fuss,” she murmured against his chest, not certain herself whether she was complaining about being lectured to or embarrassed to find him carrying her to her room--again. “I think, perhaps, I had more wine than I should have.”

“There ye go, my lord. Settle her there and I will see to her,” Nancy said briskly. “I’m sure she’ll feel right as rain as soon I loosen ... uh ... she has had a good night’s rest.”

“This is so embarrassing,” Melantha murmured as he stopped beside her bed and leaned down to settle her on the mattress.

His lips, she thought, brushed her temple. “You frightened me out of ten years of my life when you tumbled off the couch,” he muttered near her ear. “You are not allowed to faint unless it is from my kisses.”

Melantha felt a smile tug at her lips as he drew away. Still more than a little dizzy and disoriented, she curled onto her side as Nancy pulled the covers over her. She opened her eyes as she heard him move away from the bed, watching him until he vanished from her view and she heard the door close behind him.

“Ye’ll be far more comfortable if ye’ll allow me to help ye get out of that corset,” Nancy muttered as she pulled Melantha’s shoes and stocking off.

The comment struck fear into Melantha’s heart. “If I am too uncomfortable, I will take it off myself. You can go, Nancy.”

Nancy sniffed at the dismal.

“Thank you, Nancy,” Melantha said when she heard the woman at the door.

She paused. “Is there anything I can get fer ye?”

She didn’t think so, but she thought Nancy felt somewhat put out about being dismissed.

“A glass of cold water?”

“I’ll be back with it in a trice.”

Neither embarrassment nor distress set in until she found herself alone, but both settled over her as the dizziness finally waned, and fear, as well. She had never been prone to fainting. Grandmother was bound to be suspicious that she had done so with so little provocation. Lord Blackthorne, she feared, was right. Her stays were too tight.

Vanity! She had wanted to look good for him and she had wound up making a fool of herself.

Sighing, she pushed herself upright and reached behind her to loosen the gown and then the corset. She did not really have the energy to take either off, however, and lay down again, wondering if it was her condition that kept her so exhausted. She supposed it must be.

The thought brought her no comfort. She should not be encouraging Lord Blackthorne when she knew very well how disastrous the results were liable to be.

She discovered with a mixture of dismay and tentative pleasure that he did not seem to need a great deal of encouragement. Despite the fact that she must have discomfited him at the very least, he came again the following day and took her to ride in his carriage and invited her and her grandmother out to dine at the inn the night after that.

It became obvious that he was courting her, not merely trying to be a sociable neighbor, and Melantha still could not find the will to even try to discourage him. She knew it was very, very wrong of her, but could not help herself. Every day seemed brighter, filled with breathless anticipation as she dressed herself and went down to wait for him to come to call.

The long awaited and more than half forgotten letter from the solicitor arrived almost two weeks later and took her breath away, stole light from the day, brought her crashing back to Earth and stone cold reality.

He had, per her request, arranged passage and had had word from Italy that a small but comfortable cottage had been found for her. Her portion was lamentably small, but he thought if she lived prudently she should be able to rub along in tolerable comfort.

It was good news, wonderful news!

She cried for hours.

When she had calmed down, she went up to the attic to find a trunk.

Sweating with effort, dirty from the dust she had picked up in the attic, she had just

managed to drag the unwieldy, incredibly heavy thing into her room when Nancy tapped on her door and informed her that her grandmother needed to speak to her in the parlor right away.

Sighing, Melantha debated briefly over whether to annoy her grandmother by making her wait while she cleaned up, or annoying her grandmother by arriving in her parlor unkempt, and finally decided just to go on down. She would still have to clean the trunk up before she could use it and she did not feel up to bathing and changing, and then coming back to clean the trunk and bathing and changing again.

She was halfway across the floor of the small parlor before she discovered that not only was her grandmother not in the small parlor, Lord Blackthorne was. She put on brakes so quickly her shoes squawked and skipped another inch or so across the hard surface.

“Merciful heavens!” Melantha gasped, whirling to beat a hasty retreat.

He caught her arm before she could accomplish it. “I wanted to speak with you.”

Melantha threw him a hunted glance. “I shall just pop upstairs and clean up then and be down in a trice.”

He frowned, glancing over her as if just seeing her for the first time. “What have you been up to?”

Melantha stared at him guiltily, but she realized it was not only pointless to prevaricate, it was of the utmost importance to announce her news first. “I was in the attic ... getting a trunk down.”

His face went perfectly blank.

Melantha struggled for a moment and finally managed to produce a smile. “I have had wonderful news,” she said, feeling her chin wobble as tears threatened again. “I am going to Italy after all. Only today I heard from my solicitor and he has very kindly made all the arrangements for me.”

He released her arm, swallowed a little sickly. “I see,” he said vaguely.

“I must apologize for my appearance,” she went on quickly. “I had not expected you, and Nancy confused the message.”

His lips curled, but it wasn’t a smile for it did not affect any other part of his face.

“It was a subterfuge to entice you down to speak with me in private.”

“Oh! I thought perhaps that I had heard her wrong.”

He drew her to the couch after a moment. She chewed her lip, but finally sat down on the edge.

“You have decided to go away?”

“Yes,” Melantha said twisting her hands together nervously in her lap, trying to infuse

some enthusiasm into it. "The plans are all made. I am to leave next month. I can ... I can scarcely contain myself."

"You must go?"

Melantha swallowed with an effort. "I want to go," she said in a forlorn voice.

He knelt, placing a hand over hers. "And if I asked you stay and be my wife?"

Melantha would have bolted from the couch right then except that he had trapped her. She stared at him in dismay, struggling to jog her mind into producing the proper response. "This is ... this is so sudden," she said a little breathlessly, uncertain of whether she would burst into tears or faint first, for she felt positively ill, dizzy.

His lips tightened. "I have made no attempt to hide my intentions."

Melantha stared down at his hand, which rested on hers and brushed her rounding belly. It was as well she was staring at the reminder of why she could not accept, she thought a little wildly, for the moment he said it she wanted to, so badly she could scarcely think. She dragged in a painful breath. "I am ... honored and flattered, my lord."

"Do not say it," he growled, breaking into the speech she was trying to formulate.

She looked up at him and discovered she could not bring his face into focus. "I am only going away for a time," she lied. "If you still feel the same"

He caught her hands and drew her to her feet. Cupping his hand along her cheek, he applied just enough pressure to make her meet his eyes. "I thought" He hesitated. "Was I wrong in believing that you had developed some regard for me?"

Melantha's chin wobbled. Unable to form the words she knew she needed to say, unable to look away, she closed her eyes. She jumped when she felt the brush of his lips along hers, her eyelids flying wide. He withdrew a hairsbreadth, studied her a moment and then touched his lips to hers again, coaxing her to open her mouth to him. Her lips tingled at the brush of his hard mouth. Her chest tightened, cutting off her air. Almost as if her body responded to him with a will of its own, she found herself swaying closer, her lips parting.

He seized the opening she offered, the crumbling of her defenses, covering her mouth, still coaxing, still gentle. The jumbled emotions inside her coalesced into one that was equally devastating as her frantically beating heart sent a rush of blood throughout her body, caused heat to burgeon inside of her.

He filled her senses deliciously, aroused a hunger in her that she had never expected to feel again, that she had mourned was lost forever.

She wanted to yield so badly that she trembled with it, but she knew what that would tell him. With an effort, she pulled away, took a step back, lifting a trembling hand to her lips. "I can not," she said shakily. "I am so sorry. I should not have accepted your company. It was wrong."

His face hardened with anger and frustration. She could see that he was at war with himself, with his pride. He swallowed audibly. "We could make this work, Mellie. Do not do this to us ... to me."

She sucked her bottom lip in to try to still the tremor, tasting him. It weakened her resolve for a moment. She forced a smile. "I am doing this for you," she whispered. "You deserve better."

She was relieved when he did not try to stop her, vastly relieved that she managed to reach her chamber and bolt the door behind her before she broke down completely. She sprawled on top of her bed, uncaring about the dust and grime that still coated her gown and skin and hair from her tussle with the trunk in the attic. For once, tears did not come. They seemed bottled in her chest, making it achingly tight and hard to breathe.

If he had not asked, she would not feel as if her world had completely fallen apart again, she thought. If he had only left, and she had wondered if that was why he came, but never known, then she could have comforted herself with that thought later and not had to endure the absolute misery of saying no when she had wanted to say yes.

It had been the right thing to do. If she had had no choice at all, she might have taken his offer for the sake of the child to try to protect it, but what she had planned would be by far better for all of them.

She would not always be as miserable as she was now. She had no doubt that she would always regret that she had not been able to marry him, but she would feel better later. Soon, in a few weeks, she could openly acknowledge the child growing inside of her, take joy in it, anticipate its arrival. She would travel as a widow, and she would not be subject to censure and condemnation.

Lord Blackthorne was a good man and it seemed to her that he must care for her if he was willing to offer her marriage when she had so little to offer in return. Maybe, if she had told him, he would be willing to take her anyway, but she thought she would rather not know. The idea of lying to him though was far more terrifying than the idea of striking off on her own and trying to live without the protection of a man in a world that made no allowances for women who did not have that protection.

She lay dried eyed, listening to the mute mumble of voices below, to the door closing as Lord Blackthorne walked out of her life.

Tears burned her eyes then, but she sniffed them back and got up to clean the trunk.

She would have no trouble behaving as a grieving widow, she thought glumly as she settled to her task, wondering what she had done to deserve the misery that seemed to collect around her.

She was too sunk in misery even to jump when she heard a knock at her door later.

"Miss Melantha? Yer grandmother sent me ta tell ye ta come down ta dinner."

"Thank you, Nancy. I am not hungry."

“Ye should eat.”

She ignored that.

“I could probably sneak somethin’ up if it’s just that ye don’t feel like facin’ yer grandmother just now.”

Melantha sighed, realizing she had been so bound up in her grief that she had forgotten about her grandmother. She could not avoid speaking to her. Finally, she decided that she would simply go downstairs and get it over with.

“Thank you, Nancy. Just tell Grandmother that I will be down in a few moments when I have changed and cleaned up.”

Melantha checked when she reached the dining room, staring at her grandmother who was seated at the table. She seemed almost to have shrunk. She looked as upset as Melantha had expected, but more than that, suddenly aged.

She entered the room when her grandmother looked up and moved to her seat.

Her grandmother looked at her piercingly several times as they were served, but she said nothing until the servants withdrew.

“Why?”

Melantha glanced at her questioningly.

“He is repellent to you in some way?” she asked tentatively.

Melantha swallowed with an effort. “He is ... completely agreeable,” she said as evenly as she could.

“Then why? Why would you send him away when he so obviously cares very deeply for you?”

Melantha felt the blood drain from her face at that. “He said that?” she asked carefully.

The old woman made a sound of disgust. “His is not the kind of man to pour out his heart, especially to someone like me. But he was crushed. Even I could see that he could scarcely hold himself together long enough to keep his pride and hurt inside and leave.”

Melantha’s chin wobbled. “Then I am sorry for it, truly sorry,” she managed to say. “I did not mean to lead him to believe that I welcomed his offer. I told him that I was going away at the very start.”

“But you still accepted his invitations!” Grandmother snapped, anger filling her voice at last. “That was so wrong of you! So cruel and selfish! And I have never before known of you to do a cruel or selfish thing! Why?”

Melantha’s eyes stung. “Because I could not help myself!” she said angrily. “I just wanted to be happy for a little while. I never thought that he would come to care for me. I thought, at first, that he was only being neighborly. And then, I thought perhaps it was

only because he had decided that he was ready to settle down, and it would not truly matter who he settled upon. I thought that he would be angry, maybe a little disappointed. I did not set out to hurt him! I would not have so for the world!”

“Because you care for him?”

“Yes!” The word was out before she could stop it and she looked at her grandmother accusingly.

“Then why did you refuse him!”

Melantha stared at her grandmother miserably. “Because I am with child, Grandmother!”

A look of disgust, not horror, crossed her grandmother’s features. “Child! I am old! I am not stupid or blind. Do you think I did not notice?”

Melantha gaped at her in shocked disbelief. “You knew? How long have you known?”

“Probably longer than you have,” she said dryly. “I had a dozen of my own, and I was with your mother when she had hers. There are always signs even before a woman begins to blossom.

“Besides, from the time Rupert took them off you have moped around here until a person would have to be a complete moron not to see how miserably unhappy you were. And it took no great leap to figure out that you had gotten sweet on one of those rakes your brother dragged up!”

Melantha pushed her plate away and covered her face with her hands. “Then why would you ask me why I had turned him down if you knew I was with child?” she demanded after a moment, dropping her hands.

For the first time, Grandmother looked shocked. “It isn’t his?” she asked weakly.

A fiery blush suffused Melantha’s cheeks. “I don’t think so,” she muttered, wishing she had said anything besides what she had said.

“Good god!” Grandmother exclaimed, placing a shaking hand on her chest. “Melantha Eugenia! You are not saying you do not know who the father is?”

“I told you there was a man in my room!” Melantha snapped crossly.

“You do not know who your lover was?” Grandmother asked faintly.

“No,” Melantha responded in a subdued voice.

Grandmother fell silent, eating her food almost as if she had no idea that she was doing so. “Eat,” she said finally. “For the baby,” she added when Melantha only looked at her.

She was too distressed to have any appetite at all, but she dutifully ate what she could.

“He knows you are with child,” Grandmother announced sometime later. “I am almost convinced of it!”

Melantha looked up from her plate in surprise. "You think so?" she asked, frowning. "I thought he must," she added slowly, "but then he seemed to be courting me and I decided that he must not have noticed or he would not have."

"Unless he has reason to believe the child is his?" Grandmother asked hopefully.

Melantha reddened again. "I did not ... we did not. I don't think so."

"Oh. You are certain he was not the scoundrel slipping into your bed?"

Melantha cringed inside. "I am not certain of anything, Grandmother, but I can not picture Lord Blackthorne sneaking through my window at night. He is just too ... big, for one thing. And he is so ... cool and sophisticated, so controlled. Not at all wild, not the sort of man one could imagine would do something so ... daring and dangerous.

"I could far more easily have imagined that it was any of the others, including Sir Knightly, for despite the fact that he behaved in a very gentlemanly manner, there was a wildness in his eyes. And Lord Blackthorne told me that he was renowned for his conquests, primarily because he could not restrain himself from bragging about them."

Grandmother gasped in outrage. "That scoundrel! I will write Rupert tomorrow and tell him he is to call the man out!"

Chapter Sixteen

It took Melantha the better part of two hours to convince her grandmother not to write to Rupert and demand any such thing. Even the suggestion that it could create a scandal did not particularly disturb her. She merely pointed out that it had been months since the man had been on the place and Rupert could easily use some other excuse to call him out.

She did not argue nearly as long with Melantha over her refusal to consider accepting Lord Blackthorne's offer. She was inclined to think that he would get over the disappointment and anger of discovering she was with child, but she was obviously not completely convinced he would.

Finally, she sighed. "I do not particularly want to go back to Italy," she muttered.

Melantha looked at her in surprise. "You do not have to. I have made arrangements. I am a grown woman. I will be just fine."

"You are not going without me!" she said with finality. "I would not sleep a wink if you were to go off on your own. But you are right. This will be the best solution. We can say that you were widowed and no one will ever know the difference. We could not do that here. And no one is ever fooled when daughters go off on extended trips and then their mother miraculously produces a late life child. And I am certainly far too old even for that tale, as flimsy as it is for anyone to use.

"I will write to Rupert and tell him that you and I have decided that this cold climate simply does not agree with us and that we are going back to Italy."

Melantha grew misty eyed. "You would do that? Go with me?"

Grandmother looked at her as if she had lost her mind. "Why would you think I would not? I am certainly not going to allow you to go alone! I am old, but you will find that I am very useful to have around with a baby, for I raised quite a few of my own besides helping your dear mother, and nothing beats experience! Mark my words, the moment he begins to squall you will be very glad to have me!"

She smiled abruptly. "It will be so delightful to have a baby around again!"

Melantha did cry then, but not from misery for a change, from gladness, falling into her grandmother's arms and weeping all over her. It made her feel so much better to think that she would have her grandmother with her, that she would not be trying to get along completely on her own when she had never done so.

When she had dried her eyes, she and her grandmother sat for a time making arrangements and finally, late into the night, went up to bed.

Her first task the following morning was to write to her solicitor and explain to him that they would need to adjust their travel arrangements since her grandmother had decided to travel with her. Grandmother sat down and wrote a letter to Rupert when Melantha had finished with her own letter and they sent a servant to post them.

Her grandmother was most displeased when she discovered that Melantha intended to go out riding. She had not been happy about it any of the time, but she had been pretending she did not know before. "Blossom is almost impossible to startle or beat into anything more than a walk," Melantha pointed out. "I will be careful, but I will not be able to ride for much longer and I can not bear being cooped up in the house all day long."

Grandmother frowned. "I suppose if I were to tell the stable hands that you were not to ride that you would go for a walk anyway, and then you could slip on ice," she grumbled. "Well, you must be particularly careful if you are too hardheaded to listen to reason. I am looking forward to cuddling my great grandchild!"

As relieved as she was to get out of the house, Grandmother had planted a seed of anxiety in her mind and although she did ride Blossom that day, thereafter she took to walking.

She missed Lord Blackthorne terribly, but she knew her decision was for the best, and she was glad that he did not make things more awkward and uncomfortable by returning. It helped her feelings a great deal that her grandmother would be going with her and that she no longer had to worry so much about trying to hide her condition.

Rupert arrived without warning a week later, furious as he stormed into the house. "What the devil is all this about moving back to Italy?" he demanded the moment he stomped into the parlor where Melantha and her grandmother sat.

Grandmother sent him a mild look of surprise. "Why, Rupert, dear! I explained it in the letter!"

He glared at her. "I don't want to go back to Italy, damn it!"

"Language dear. You do not have to. Melantha and I are going."

Rupert turned to glare at Melantha. He stared at her a full minute as the fury slowly slid off his face and his jaw dropped. "Hell and confound it, Mel! If it isn't just like you to go and do something like this! Who is he? I will cut his heart out! I will choke the life out of him!"

"One of your friends, I expect," Grandmother said calmly. "She will not divulge the father even to me."

"She will tell me!" Rupert growled.

"I will box your ears if you lay a hand on your sister!"

Rupert turned red as a beet as he whirled to look at his grandmother. "I am a grown man," he growled after a stunned moment.

"Then behave like one. It is your fault!"

Rupert's jaw sagged again. "My fault!"

"She should have been settled years ago, and you know it! Furthermore, it was you who brought that bunch of scoundrels and rakes here!"

Rupert frowned, looked around a little doubtfully and finally sprawled into a chair. "Tell me who he is, Mel, and I will drag him here and he will say his vows or I will put a hole in him!"

Melantha looked at her brother for a long moment. "As much as I appreciate the brotherly sentiment, Rupert, I would have to live with the man. And I would rather not, thank you!"

Rupert glared at her, but fell into silence again, propping his chin on his fist and glaring at the fire. "I suppose I could sell the place to Lord Blackthorne. He expressed an interest in it, and he is obscenely wealthy. Made a bloody fortune for himself in shipping ... or something like that," he muttered.

Melantha and her grandmother exchanged a glance. "I think I will take a walk," Melantha said.

She was not aware of consciously making a decision, but she turned her steps toward the west. Even when she had walked for a time, she told herself that she would turn back in a few moments. She would only go a little further and then she would turn around and go home again.

It was a very long way from Remington Manor to the dower house by way of the road, but far closer through the woods.

She only wanted to see him, just once more before they left England.

From a distance. She did not think she could bear talking to him, even if he was all that was polite and never said a word about what had passed between them.

And she was fairly certain that she could count on that.

She saw the wrought iron fence before she saw him.

Surprised, for she was fairly certain that she had not reached the boundary that separated the properties, she stopped. He stood so perfectly still, staring down at the ground that she felt a prick of curiosity and after a moment, she moved a little closer.

He was standing in a cemetery, she discovered, staring at a head stone.

He had been standing there for some time, for it had begun to snow lightly and she could see that snow had collected on the shoulders of his cloak and the brim of his hat.

She should go, she realized, not move closer, not intrude, but she discovered that she was moving toward him. She did not stop again until she was near enough to read the writing carved into the headstone.

Elizabeth Blackthorne, Countess of Remington, and infant daughter

Beloved wife of John Blackthorne, Sixth Marquis of Remington

Beloved mother of Edward and Ransom

Lord Blackthorne was looking at her when she lifted her gaze at last. She was too shocked at first to absorb it, but it would not be denied. As insidiously as poison everything began to come together in her mind and take form and shape and substance.

Her lips were dry and stiff with cold and shock. She moistened them. "You are the son," she said hoarsely.

A muscle worked his jaw. "Ransom," he acknowledged flatly. He looked away after a moment, looking around him. "Life is full of ironies," he said pensively. "Or perhaps its only that people are so perverse and can never appreciate what they have because they are too busy looking at what someone else has that they think is better."

He returned his gaze to her. "I was the younger son, born to make my own way in the world, born to inherit nothing. I used to listen to my mother trying to teach my elder brother our lineage. She took pride in it. Maybe that was why I did, but Edward did not. To Edward, this place was old and outdated and something that should be torn down and replaced. It was a burden and everything about his position represented responsibilities that he despised.

"I left as soon as I was old enough, not because I wanted to leave. Not because I wanted adventure--because all I really wanted was here--but because I loved my brother, and I did not want to begin to hate him for what he had that I could never have and I had already begun to envy him and resent the fact that he was to have what I wanted.

"So I set out to make my own fortune, to build a heritage for my own line, something my

children and grandchildren could take pride in.”

Her vision blurred. “Why? I do not understand why you did ... that to me!”

His face hardened. “There is no excuse, Mellie.”

“But ... a reason?”

He moved toward her, caught her arms. “Rage, grief--the insanity that comes from refusing to accept. I left my home to seek my fortune and returned to find my father and brother dead and the only home I had ever known gone--everything gone, even to the cemetery where my mother is buried.

“It took them years to track me down and tell me that my brother had run off to join the army after I left and died in battle and that my father had turned to drinking and gambling in his grief and then, once he had run through everything, gone out to ‘hunt’ and had an accident. They brought me the letter he had written just before his accident, a long, rambling, mostly incomprehensible letter about my inheritance and how he had been cheated. I wanted to blame someone, I needed to blame someone, anyone but my father, the only person who was responsible.

He shook his head. “I found the papers,” he said, his face twisting in disgust, “pressed between the pages of the account ledgers in Rupert’s study--that was what my father had left me. The original family charter from the first Marquis to hold that title, and the deed he had signed over to your brother in a wager. I was certain I would find some discrepancy. There was none, but then I have known Rupert for a while now. He is a wastrel and a gambler. He is tiresome, and disgracefully irresponsible, but he is no cheat. God knows he might be better off he was for he has the worst luck at the tables of any man I’ve ever seen.”

She frowned, remembering the papers he had been so determined to get, the casket with the coat of arms that she could not identify. She dropped her gaze. “You believed you had been wronged. It was only about revenge then? For wrongs you believed had been done you?”

She heard him swallow and looked up at him.

“This thing between you and I was never about revenge, Mellie. I told myself that that was what it was, but it wasn’t.”

“Then why?” she demanded.

“The truth is no prettier,” he ground out.

“You at least owe me that much, damn you!”

“Because I could!” he said harshly. “Because I saw you and I wanted you and no one could stop me!”

Anger surged through her abruptly. Jerking free of his hold, she balled her hands into

fists and pounded them into his chest. He caught her wrists, manacling them with his hands. "Damn it, woman! That hurts!"

She struggled against his hold. "I want to hurt you! I want to kill you, you cad!"

She burst into tears when she realized she couldn't break his hold, when she'd worn herself out with trying, dropping her forehead against his chest. "You hurt me!" she cried. "You hurt me so much I wanted to die when you left me. And you just left without a word. Why did you do that to me? I never did anything to you! I didn't deserve that!"

He released her wrists hesitantly, curled his arms around her. "God help me, I did not want to leave, Mellie, but neither could I live with what I was doing to you. I was trying to protect you. I know I was a complete coward to leave without telling you to your face, but I knew if I went back that I would only make things worse, that I would lose my resolve. I tried to explain in the letter I left you."

He had left a letter, Melantha thought, stunned?

She had burned it when she had burned the diary.

She lifted her head and glared at him. "You think a letter would have made me feel better! That it would make things alright?"

His jaw tightened. "Do you think I do not know that I have made a damnable mess of my life? Nothing could make it right. God help me, I never meant to hurt you! I know what I did was unforgivable, that you can never forgive me for it, but I want to do what I can to make it right. I have been trying to make it right. Marry me, Mellie. I swear to you that I will be a good husband. You will never have cause to regret it."

She thrust herself away from him, dashing at her tears. "As if I would ever let you hurt me again, you black hearted rogue! I gave my heart into your keeping ... twice! And you have done nothing but deceive me and lie to me! Not one honest emotion!"

"I never lied to you," he growled.

"Only because you never said anything!" she snapped.

He caught her arm when she whirled to leave. "Be reasonable, Mellie! You are carrying my child. Let me give him my name, for god's sake!"

"I am carrying my child!" she snapped. "You dropped him on me when you made me your whore! Do not stand there and tell me your conscience is bothering you now! For I do not care! I hope your conscience kills you!"

He stared at her for a long moment, a muscle working in his jaw as he tried to tamp the anger blazing in his eyes. "I will take you home."

"Your home, you mean? The one you bargained with me for? The one you spoke to Rupert about buying back? Well, you have succeeded! You have gotten what you used me to get! Rupert will sell it back to you, for we are going to Italy, and I wish you joy of

it!”

“You wish me in hell,” he growled.

“I do!”

“Then you will be delighted to know that I am!”

She glared at him, but she was not going to give him the opening to tell her more lies! She was in hell! She had spent months grieving over him! Months! And more months terrified because he had gotten her with child and abandoned her to fend for herself. She hoped he was suffering! “Let go of my arm!”

His eyes narrowed. “It might please you no end to stalk back through a snow storm and die somewhere along the way, but I am not about to let you,” he growled. “You can come with me willingly and allow me to drive you back to Remington Manor, or I will carry you kicking and screaming!”

She despised the way he was always so damned reasonable! “Fine!” she snapped angrily. “But Rupert is there and he was not pleased!”

He sent her a sardonic glance as he walked her back toward his carriage, which she saw had been left at the edge of the woods that marked the boundary between the two properties. “Will it make you happy if I allow Rupert to put a bullet in me?”

“Infinitely!” She glared at him. “He does not know it was you.”

“I will tell him.”

“You will do no such thing!” Melantha gasped, her eyes widening in horror at the thought.

“Mayhap he can talk some sense into you.”

She glared at him. “You did this and I am being unreasonable!” she snapped in outrage as they reached the carriage.

He caught her waist--she thought to help her up into the carriage. Instead, he pulled her against him and kissed her. Caught completely off guard, Melantha lost the will to fight before she could discover it, wilting weakly beneath his ruthless assault on her senses.

He released her almost as abruptly as he had seized her and Melantha struggled for composure. The look of satisfaction in his eyes as he studied her face made her long for the strength to pulverize him.

Without another word, he lifted her into the carriage and drove her home.

He seemed impervious to the cold shoulder she gave him, which irritated her almost as much as the knowing way he had looked at her when he had kissed her senseless.

In fact, although his face was stern, he seemed downright cheerful, the cad!

The moment he pulled up in front of the manor, she moved to the edge of the seat to get

down by herself.

“Don’t you dare!” he growled.

Melantha subsided, responding to the command in his voice, and then glared at him when he came around and swung her from the seat to the ground.

“Thank you!” she said coldly, and turned to march up the walkway and into the house.

She discovered to her dismay when she turned to close the door behind her that Lord Blackthorne had summoned a stable hand. He turned even as she turned to close the door and strode purposefully toward the house.

After gaping at him in dismay for several stunned moments, Melantha slammed the door and hurried down the hallway toward the stairs, stumbling and nearly falling in her haste to reach the second floor and lock her door.

She listened in vain for the sound of his boots on the stairs, however. Instead, she heard Rupert let out a bellow of rage. Her heart seemed to stand still in her chest. She turned a nail trying to get the door open again and hissed in pain. Sucking on her finger, she was on the point of rushing down the stairs again when she heard Lord Blackthorne’s voice, so deadly cold with anger that a shiver crept up her spine.

“Oh god!” she gasped, terrified that one of them was going to kill the other. Uncertain of what to do, she moved to the top of the stairs and tried to peer down into the parlor below.

“Don’t be more of a damned fool that you can help, Rupert,” Lord Blackthorne said coldly. “I had already asked your permission to address her. If I had had any intention of not doing right by her I would not have asked.”

Irritation filled her. They had been discussing her marriage before he had even come to call on her? Ohhhh! That man! He was so damned sure of himself, so damned certain that all he had to do was show her a little attention and she would drop into his hands like a ripe plum, she wanted to slap his smug face.

She went back into her room, slamming the door that time and pushing the bolt home.

Well, they could discuss it until they ran out of breath and expired for all she cared!

Made his fortune at shipping! Ha! Most likely pirating! The rogue!

She paced the room for what seemed like hours, listening to the drone of voices but unable to distinguish anything they said.

It seemed obvious they were discussing her.

She heard her grandmother’s light tread in the hallway outside her door after a while.

Despite her curiosity, and her anxiety, Melantha realized that she was exhausted. It did not matter what they decided, anyway. They had no say in the matter. She was going to Italy and Ransom Blackthorne could rot in this moldy old house for all she cared.

That was probably what they were discussing, she decided as she undressed and moved to the washbasin, the sale of the house, not her. It was all he had ever wanted, she thought glumly, abruptly feeling sorry for herself.

They were probably downstairs sharing drinks and cheroots and congratulating themselves on working everything out, she thought with an abrupt burst of anger.

After standing in the middle of the floor indecisively for several moments, she finally got down on her hands and knees and put her ear to the floor. She couldn't hear anything, not even a low murmur.

Deciding they must have moved to Rupert's study, she was about to get to her feet when she heard a faint scraping sound. Frowning, she glanced toward the window and then the door and finally behind her.

Wearing nothing more than his breeches and shirt, and that open to the waist, Ransom was leaning against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest, his brooding gaze leveled on her rump, which was still in the air.

There was a door standing ajar beside him. A door that blended so cleverly with the wall around it she had never even noticed it.

That was how he had been sneaking in to and out of her room?

Stunned, Melantha merely gaped at him for several moments before she scrambled to her feet and turned to face him.

Uncrossing his arms, he lifted a finger to his lips in a shushing motion and then pointed toward her door. Puzzled, Melantha followed the direction in which he had pointed.

She heard him move a split second before a hand clamped over her mouth and another around her waist, holding her tightly against him. "Your grandmother posted a servant in the hallway."

Melantha twisted away from the hand covering her mouth. "Ransom Blackthorne, how dare"

He silenced her with his mouth that time, tangling his hand in her hair and holding her when she tried to pull away. She tried to resist his heated persuasion, but despite her anger, she had yearned so long to feel his mouth on hers, to fill her senses with him, she found it impossible to build a barrier against the longing that washed through her in a dizzying rush. Sighing, she gave up the battle without a fight, without regret, kissing him back feverishly, reveling in the liquid heat that poured through her, stirring memories of passion filled nights, arousing her.

She dragged in a shaky breath when he broke the kiss at last, struggling to recall why she was angry with him, why he should not be in room. Her head spun dizzily as he scooped her into his arms and carried her to the bed, settling her on it and following her down.

She grunted inelegantly as he sprawled on top of her, catching her wrists and pinning them to the bed on either side of her. "What do you think you're doing?" she whispered. "Is there really someone outside the do ...?"

His mouth was hot and hungry when it covered hers, cutting her off before she could finish the whispered question, submerging her almost instantly in the dizzying sensations she had only begun to surface from.

He dragged his lips from hers almost reluctantly after several moments, gasping for breath, nuzzling his face against hers, and then her throat. "Marry me, Mellie," he whispered near her ear.

She sucked in a shuddering breath. "Ransom ..."

Hearing the resistance in her voice, he shifted downward. The heat of his mouth penetrated the sheer night dress instantly and her nipple lifted to meet his caress like a blossom lifting toward the sun. Waves of exquisite sensation jolted through her, stealing her breath. She caught her breath with an effort, held it as each hard pull of his mouth, and each stroke of his tongue sent another wave of pleasure through her, generating heat that pooled in her belly as liquid need.

A soft gasp escaped her as he lifted his head. "Say yes, Ransom."

With an effort, she struggled to lift her eyelids. "Ransom," she murmured despairingly.

He dipped his head and nipped at the tip of her other breast, sending a keen shaft of pleasure through her, making it tighten almost painfully. An echo of that tension coiled hotly low in her belly. "Yes, Ransom," he repeated hoarsely, and then covered the tip, teasing it as he had the first until she was mindless with the need pounding through her, until she felt faint, weak, desperate.

Breaking the kiss when she had reached the point where she had begun to hope he would never stop, he surged over her and she felt his need digging into her belly as he burrowed his face against her neck. "Don't torture me anymore. I am repentant. I swear."

She opened her eyes to look at him as he lifted his head. His features were drawn and harsh with painful need. "I have never been more miserable in my life, Mellie, and the only way you could possibly make me more miserable is to leave where I can not even see you."

Lifting a hand, she stroked his hard cheek. He turned his face into her palm, kissing it. "Don't make beg, Mellie."

"Why?"

A pained look flickered across his features. "Because I will, and my ego might never recover."

Her lips curled. "That is not what you were supposed to say."

He studied her for a long moment. "I love you?"

She gave him a look.

Chuckling huskily, he rolled over and pulled her on top of his chest. The teasing light left his eyes and his expression became very serious as he looked up at her. "I love you, Melantha Eugenia Mansfield. You could look forever and you would never find another who loves you as I do. Will you do me the honor of being my wife?"

Sighing blissfully, she snuggled her face against his chest. "I love you, Ransom Blackthorne. I would adore being your wife."

He sighed, stroking his hand along her back. "I suppose it would be out of the question to begin the honeymoon now?"

Melantha chuckled, kissing a trail of light kisses from his neck downward. "What, exactly, did you do to make your fortune, my lord rogue?" she asked when she had teased him as he had teased her.

The End