



The
Viscount's
Addiction

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Chapter One

“Out of bed, you filthy rubbish!”

The turnkey’s voice thundered through Ryder’s dreams. He tried to slide back into sleep to recapture the only blissful moments he enjoyed outside the gates of hell. There was a sickening cracking sound too near his ear. He lurched into a sitting position. His head felt as though it had been cleaved in two. It was an all too familiar feeling, a consequence of his unsavory habit.

His eyes narrowed in response to the thin light that threaded through the grates. Remnants of furniture were still strewn across the ward from yesterday’s near-riot. A charming Newgate tradition. A destructive farewell from those being shipped off to Botany Bay to serve their sentences.

The turnkey paced the ward, brandishing a table leg he had ripped from a ruined table. Now that Vickers had a makeshift weapon, he only wanted for a victim.

Ryder gave his tattered blanket a shake, scattering the vermin that had shared his bed for the night. The faint odor of death wafted over from Finch’s mat. Ryder pressed the back of his hand to his nose. The officials were waiting a bloody long time for a family member to claim him. Chances were, no one would come for the poor bastard and he’d be sold for profit and end up on a dissection table in a university.

Ryder reached into his boot and pulled out the small lump of opium and ripped off a bite. To wash away the bitter taste, he removed the contraband gin he kept stashed under his mat. Blessed William and his successful trading schemes. Once William had realized that one man’s shoes were worth another man’s tobacco, then anything, even a comb with missing teeth, became currency. Size and strength were Ryder’s commodities. While he wasn’t always clear-headed, he could still break a man’s jaw if the situation called for it. Thankfully, William was clever enough to appreciate it and made his payments with liquor. The opium, though, came from a sinister source, but Ryder’s cravings made the origin unimportant.

With three swallows, he neatly finished the gin. He stared at the empty bottle for a moment before deciding to fling it across the room. It hit his intended target squarely on the back of the head. Profanity spewed from the turnkey's mouth as he spun around to find his assailant. Vickers's glare honed in on Ryder.

"Sorry, must have slipped," Ryder said dryly.

The hulking figure stomped toward him. As the table leg cut the air above his head, Ryder rolled away onto the filth-covered floor. The club hit the stone wall, and splinters of wood rained down on his head. Ryder tried to sit up to get his bearings, but something had hold of him. He reached back and felt the cold fingers of his cadaverous neighbor caught in his long hair. Nausea shuddered through him as he yanked his hair free from the lifeless grip. He jumped to his feet, swaying a bit as he waited for the dizziness to clear. Suppressing the instinct for self-preservation, he made himself an easy mark. He braced himself for the explosion of pain and wondered fleetingly if a death wish had prompted him to hurl the bottle at Vickers.

"That's right, you cocky bastard. You hold still while I pummel you into a heap of bones and flesh." The man's words came with stale breath.

Ryder prayed the oafish bastard would manage it in one swing.

"Vickers! Put that down!" The chief warder's voice echoed off the walls. "And bring Blackwood to the governor's office, now!"

Vickers brought the stick down, slashing it so near Ryder that it stirred his hair. There were grumbles from his ward-mates, disappointed by the lack of carnage.

Ryder moved past Vickers. "Perhaps next time you will be a little fucking faster."

The guard's thin lips pulled back in a malicious smile. "Bloody hell right, there'll be a next time." He prodded Ryder with the jagged end of the table leg. "You heard the chief warder, now move!" Vickers ground the stick between his shoulder blades. Ryder could feel the blood trickling down his back as he was spurred past the yards, through the clanging gates and along the maze of passages. He prayed that he wasn't being sent back to Coldbath Fields. A trip to the scaffold was far more to his liking. Last Sunday he'd attended the Condemned Sermon and stared at the centerpiece of the macabre service, the empty coffin, with a sort of longing.

Ryder believed he had his viscountcy to thank for having been tried on a lesser charge than murder and thus spared a capital sentence. He'd been relieved at the time because it meant he would not forfeit his lands. He'd avoided the noose but not punishment. Deeming him too dangerous to walk the streets, they'd caged him. However,

he had come to learn that death certainly trumped time spent on the agonizing treadmill or working the water engine crank or days of mind-twisting isolation.

With a final vicious jab, Vickers forced him into the governor's office. Quillton fussed with some papers on his desk before acknowledging Ryder. His small, close-set eyes peered out of a ruddy, porcine face, and his bulbous, misshapen nose, the product of heavy drinking, resembled a pink cauliflower.

A cozy fire flickered in the hearth. The wainscoting gleamed with polish. And Ryder, in his filthy shirtsleeves and trousers, felt half-human in the pristine surroundings.

Vickers stepped in behind Ryder. "When you're done with 'im, I'd like a few moments with the bastard myself."

"Yes, yes, let's get this over with. I'm in a hurry." Quillton hitched his hip on the front of his desk.

"What's the matter, Quillton?" Ryder asked. "You afraid all the good cadavers will be dragged from the Thames before you get there?"

Quillton's fist came crashing into Ryder's chin, the heavy ring slicing into his bottom lip.

Wincing, Quillton uncurled his fist and shook out his hand. "You see that, Vickers? Didn't even nudge him. We've built a formidable brute. Perhaps the House of Correction ought to limit the time they give the inmates on those contraptions. Wouldn't do if we created prisons full of men capable of overtaking the guards."

Quillton moved quickly to put the desk between himself and the prisoner.

Ryder allowed the blood to drip down his chin and onto his shirt, watching it with a certain fascination.

"Couldn't help myself, Blackwood. I get tired of looking at that arrogant smirk of yours. Besides that, I won't tolerate anyone inferring that I'm a grave robber. My little side business is completely legal. Nothing wrong with it at all."

Ryder spat blood-riddled saliva onto the floor. "I doubt Finch would agree. Dead he may be, but he's not free of you yet. He's still stuck in this rotting hole waiting for your ghouls to carry him off."

"A scraggy specimen, Finch, but what can you do? Shame I won't be having your fine carcass to pawn off anytime soon." Quillton laughed as he tossed an old linen bag to Ryder.

Puzzled, Ryder opened it and pulled out the contents—a silk cravat, a cashmere waistcoat and an evening coat with a velvet collar. The vestiges of another life. He looked at Quillton. “I don’t understand.”

“Those are the things you wore when they brought you in here,” Quillton said, explaining the obvious. “A gaggle of doxies who knew the murdered woman paid a visit to the magistrate. Insisted you were innocent. Admitted they’d all seen the real murderer, though they couldn’t name him. Inconceivable that they took the word of whores.”

“What took them so bloody long to come forward?”

“Perhaps the question is *why did they suddenly come forward?* And my answer would be money. Wealth, it seems, can buy everything. Including a ticket out of the gaol.”

“There isn’t a soul I know who would part with a farthing to see me released,” he said. “*I am* innocent.”

“The face of an angel, eh, Vickers?” Quillton leaned over the table, his cheeks reddening. “Never hurt a woman, never made her scream for the pure pleasure of it, eh?”

“I have made many a woman scream, but I sure as hell have never hurt one.”

Quillton studied him a moment from beneath hooded lids. His lips curled into a hyena’s grin. It was one of the ugliest smiles Ryder had ever seen. “Now that’s a pleasurable image, eh, Vickers? Wouldn’t this brute of ours be something to watch swiving a young beauty?”

Vickers grunted, clearly not entranced by the thought.

The greed receded from the warden’s eyes as he seemed to realize he’d revealed too much of himself.

Ryder shoved the clothes back into the bag.

“You might be able to trade those rich threads for a few beans. At least enough to get you back home,” Quillton said.

“I have no home. Least not one I care to return to.”

“Where are you headed then?”

“Nearly around the corner. As they say—if you’re looking for sin, you head to Middlesex,” Ryder said without hesitation.

“What is it with you spoiled, rich bucks? Can’t wait to get some pussy, eh?”

Vickers let out a guffaw. “Pussy ain’t the only pleasure he’s going in search of. Take a look at the man’s eyes. Like blue saucers. I’ve seen pinpricks bigger than his pupils.”

Quillton frowned at Vickers’s outburst but did not utter a word in response, confirming Ryder’s suspicion that the warden had had knowledge of the opium being funneled to him. “I’ve no doubt, Blackwood, that I’ll be seeing you again, very soon.” He strode purposefully to the door.

The second the door shut behind Quillton, the guard hurried over to Ryder. He slapped the stick against the palm of his hand, a vile gleam in his eye.

Ryder took one step forward, wrapped his hand around the club, and with a hard twist, wrenched it easily out of Vickers’s hand. “Strike me again, and I will shove that stick so far up your arse you will be blowing it out your nose.”



The unbearable throbbing in his head let Ryder know he’d lived to see another day. He inched out from under the bare, long leg that lay across his chest, trying not to wake the woman to whom it was attached. Her small foot twitched as his rough beard scraped her toes. Once free, he rolled over and found, to his surprise, a second naked woman sleeping soundly and hugging the edge of the bed. He maneuvered over her. Once his feet were firmly planted on the ground, he lifted his head carefully. It felt too heavy for his neck. He had no memory of the evening and wondered if it had taken two whores to get his cock to stand. Opium played hell with his erections. It had become a rare feat for even his own practiced hand to bring him to climax.

He moved to the window and folded back the dust-coated drapes, allowing a sliver of sunlight into the room. The floor was littered with clothes, bed sheets and empty gin bottles. Yesterday’s wash water stagnated in the ewer basin. Ryder splashed the stale water onto his face. He lifted his head and dragged his wet fingers through his hair. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the warped mirror on the wall and was repulsed by what he saw. His skin had taken on an unholy pallor, a startling contrast to his black hair. There were dark, blue-tinged circles under his eyes and his pupils were eerily large, a sign he’d been without opium for too long. He looked as if he’d just risen from the grave.

In prison he’d often lost the thread of time. Even now the days blurred together. But he could name the year and he knew that the man staring back at him was only in his late twenties. Gone, it seemed, were any traces of innocence, replaced by an alien hardness he

found difficult to accept. He reached for his breeches and pulled them on. Unable to find his shirt amongst the tangle of discarded garments on the floor, he reached for his long, black coat hanging from the bedpost.

He had won the coat wagering on a fight between a boisterous naval officer and a tough-talking farrier. The blackness of it had suited his mood perfectly.

He fished around in the pockets and produced enough coins to get him into some card games at the tavern. With a little luck, he would be able to buy some twists of opium rather than the weak tincture the apothecary concocted for him.

An icy wind filtered through the star-like crack in the window. He brought the collar of the coat up around his ears and braced himself for the frigid outside air.

He glanced at the two naked beauties and with a shrug tossed his coins on the bed and reached under the mattress to retrieve the last gold buttons from his waistcoat. Quietly, he shut the door behind him. The block that housed all the seedier trade shops was only an alley away. He stopped in front of the pawnbroker's and inspected his wares. He needed another pair of boots; he was starting to feel the ground through his old ones. Unfortunately, his desire for opium trumped his need for warm feet and the pawning of the buttons would not afford him both.

Ryder pressed closer to the grease-streaked pane. A finely dressed gentleman stood amidst people's discarded treasures talking with the shop owner. The customer turned, his sharp profile now clearly delineated. Although it had been five years, he knew his cousin Lewis instantly. Lewis looked nearly as pale and hollow-eyed as he did. Obviously, he was still living the life of a gamester, spending his waking hours cloistered in dim gambling hells. This visit to the pawnbroker meant his blunt was spent. He watched as his cousin held up a golden pocket watch for the pawnbroker to examine. The numerous fob charms glinted in the candlelight. Ryder's hand curled into a fist. The timepiece had been his father's, and Ryder had inherited it upon his death. So the weasel had gained access to his estate. He clenched his teeth as Lewis eagerly accepted the pittance the broker offered.

Lewis burst out of the shop and rushed past Ryder without even a glance.

"Bloody fool," Ryder muttered and determined to follow his cousin. He wondered just how long it would take the loser to gamble away a prized heirloom. It had always puzzled Ryder how Lewis had become so completely enthralled with gaming—considering how notoriously unlucky he was at it.

Ryder's head was swimming and he had some difficulty keeping track of his cousin as he cut a circuitous path through the crowded streets and narrow alleyways. Chances were, Lewis could make his way from the pawnbroker to the card tables in his sleep.

Upon entering familiar territory, Ryder slowed his step. He hesitated a moment before trailing his cousin to one of the town's most disreputable haunts. The only pretensions the gaming hell had to a legitimate establishment was its cheery white and yellow façade. Lewis pushed through the front door, completely oblivious to the stranger in the black coat following on his heels.

Hazy light filtered through the small, square window of the inner door. His cousin nodded at the guard and was quickly ushered inside. As expected, the door shut promptly in Ryder's face.

Marley's cynical eye stared at him through the spy-hole. "The boss ain't hiring. He's got thugs aplenty upstairs keeping the bastards honest."

"I've come to play, Scrag."

Only patrons were familiar with the nickname. Marley had earned the moniker after removing an unruly player with a little too much exuberance. He'd nearly strangled the man when he'd used his cravat to drag him outside.

Ryder took a step back from the door to let Marley get a better look.

"Lord Blackwood?"

"Fresh from Newgate."

"You've changed, my lord," Marley said as he opened the door.

"Really, I hadn't noticed," Ryder replied as he squeezed past Marley. He walked up the steps and strode into the smoky, tension-filled atmosphere of the main gaming room.

He squinted through the smoke and spotted his cousin's blond curls. As he moved farther into the room, a large hand fell heavily atop his shoulder and squeezed.

"And where do you think you're goin'?"

Ryder twisted his head and eyed the hand on his shoulder. He gave the man a look that caused him to release his hold in an instant.

"This club is for members only."

"I am a member," he snarled. "I am Ryder Braddock, Viscount Blackwood."

"Right, and I'm King George." The man punctuated his statement with an irritating laugh.

"Pleasure, your Majesty. Sorry, can't stay and chat. I'm here to play." Ryder took a step in the direction of the Hazard tables but stopped when the oaf pressed the barrel of a pistol to the base of his skull.

"You are truly beginning to annoy me," Ryder said.

"What seems to be the problem here, Jenkins?" a familiar voice queried.

"Scrag must be piss drunk again. He's letting any cutthroat off the street stroll in here. This sod claims he's a member—says he's the Viscount of Blakeley or some damn thing."

"That's Blackwood, you *royal* ass."

"Sir, I'm afraid you will have to leave," the man behind him insisted.

Ryder turned to face him as Jenkins followed his every movement with the pistol still placed securely against his head.

"What are you saying, Fox? Am I no longer welcome in this fine establishment?" Ryder inclined his head toward the crowded gaming room. Fox, the manager, had changed little in the past five years. He scrutinized Ryder's face for a long moment and then produced a puzzled smile.

"Well, damn it, Blackwood, don't you look like the devil himself. I'd heard rumor they'd let you out of Newgate." He laughed and gave Ryder a hearty slap on the shoulder. "I'd always known they'd convicted the wrong man."

"Amazing, Fox, you and I thinking the same thing all this time." Ryder motioned with his eyes toward the pistol still aimed at his head. "Mind calling off your lackey?"

"Jenkins, you may go. I'll handle it from here." Fox waited for his man to disappear then leaned in as he spoke. "You know, your cousin Lewis has been playing dangerously deep. For the past week, he's been wed to the tables."

"I suppose he wants to see how quickly he can deplete my estate. Do you suppose you could get me in on his game without letting on who I am?"

"Do you really think your own cousin won't know you?"

"It took you a bloody long time to recognize me. And I wonder if you ever would have if I hadn't mentioned my name."

"Most likely not."

"Besides, when he's in a fever, he only has eyes for his game."

"Too true."

“Be a friend and lend me a few pounds. I promise to repay you before I leave here tonight.” Ryder began buttoning up his long coat and brushing off the street dust in an effort to make himself more presentable.

“I don’t know, Blackwood. I mean, look at you. You look as if you’ve crawled out from under a—”

“I feel even worse than I look, but I need to teach a lesson to the insolent pup. Will you help me out?”

Fox pulled the cravat from around his neck. “Well at least put this on.” He pulled out a wad of banknotes and peeled off several, handing them to Ryder. “Hold on a minute,” he said as he dashed over to the bottles of liquor lining the walls. He handed Ryder a pint of well-aged scotch. “It’s on the house. A homecoming gift. You look like you need it.”

Ryder shoved the bottle into his pocket. “I always knew I was fond of you, Fox.”

Ryder adjusted the collar of his coat, effectively shadowing his lower face as Fox escorted him to the green baize table. He was in luck. Lewis was playing Hazard. Ryder was quite good at mastering the odds.

“Treat him right. He’s a good friend of mine,” Fox said by way of introduction. He handed Ryder the dice box. “I’m sure these gentlemen won’t mind if you throw.”

Thankfully, the other players were strangers to Ryder. A few gave him odd looks, but his cousin barely glanced at him. Hoping to obscure his features, Ryder leaned forward, causing his hair to drape his face. He altered the pitch of his voice as he placed his stake. The other players put down their bets. The dice rolled well for him. He nicked it on the first wager. After a string of wins, Ryder looked over at his cousin. Lewis’s hair was plastered to his forehead with sweat. His cousin, suddenly sensing the scrutiny, briefly met his gaze. His nostrils flared for a second, but there was not a glimmer of recognition in his dull brown eyes. Lewis turned his attention to the other players, offering up his familiar smug smile as he pushed away from the table.

“I don’t know about the rest of you gentlemen, but I refuse to play any longer with this filthy, unkempt thief. He doesn’t even have the decency to show his face at the table,” Lewis said before stalking away. He’d used Ryder as an excuse to leave the game before he disgraced himself. Clearly, his pockets were empty, all the money from the pawnbroker having found its way into Ryder’s winning pile.

After rolling his chance point again, Ryder relinquished the dice. His hands were starting to shake. He fumbled and dropped a few coins as he scooped up his winnings.

Needing relief, Ryder uncapped the scotch and downed near a quarter of it. He stuffed the bottle in his pocket and walked over to Fox. He repaid the loan with interest.

“Why don’t you do yourself a favor, Blackwood, and spend the rest on something besides decadent pleasures? Food, perhaps, or a carriage ride home. Go home to Tesslyn Hall. It’s where you belong.”

“Hardly the worst advice you’ve ever given, Fox. But why must I limit myself? Why not have it all? Tesslyn Hall *and* decadent pleasures—not a bad mix. First, though, I must see a man about a watch.” Ryder yanked off the cravat and handed it to Fox. Gooseflesh crawled up the back of his neck. He felt suddenly wrong in his own skin. Agitated, he turned abruptly and clashed shoulders with his cousin. Lewis muttered an oath and moved swiftly away, too preoccupied to realize he’d just run into the end of his future.

Chapter Two

Jessie cursed her luck. The freezing rain was now coming down in sheets and Titus, her black Shire, was in no mood to gallop through sticky mud. Instead, he slowed to a gingerly trot, completely ignoring Jessie's constant prodding. She would have beaten the storm if Mrs. Duckett hadn't insisted she stay for tea.

Once the barn was in view, Titus picked up his pace. "'Tis a little late now, you stubborn ox. I'm already soaked to the bone."

She dismounted clumsily, her limbs stiff from the cold. Inside the rundown barn, rainwater streamed through the Swiss cheese roof. She led Titus to the one stall that was fairly dry and swept up an armful of hay. With a chomp, the hungry gelding grabbed the clump of hay from her hands, scattering bits everywhere. Browned grass stuck to Jessie's wet blouse. She plucked several dry blades from her hair.

"Titus! First you prance daintily home like you're royalty, and now you greedily snatch your food like you are...like you are royalty." She smiled, thinking it a clever little quip and wishing that someone besides her horse had been around to appreciate it. She felt her loneliness like a hollow in her heart.

Jessie shoved with all her strength against the warped barn door until it finally rattled shut. A hard wind had kicked up, adding to the misery of the evening. A strong gust pressed her sodden skirt against her legs. Her wet hair wrapped around her mouth and throat as she hugged herself and ran toward the house.

Through the windows she glimpsed the glow of candlelight, but it was not a welcoming sight. It signaled Lewis's return. He was always such a miserable creature when he came home from London. Nowadays, he returned only when he'd lost everything save coach fare. For Lewis, Tesslyn Hall was a treasure chest to be plundered.

Jessie avoided the crumbling, second step of the stairway then leaped over the puddles gathering in the large fissures in the stoop. The front door, which had once been a mahogany masterpiece, stood slightly ajar. She hesitated a moment then assured herself

that the wind had blown it open before stepping inside. The flickering light cast all the usual familiar patterns onto the peeling paint of the entrance hall. Suddenly, her shadow was joined by another, far more menacing silhouette. The breath froze in her throat.

“Who the hell are you?” a deep voice rumbled behind her.

Shivering now from fear and not the cold, she willed herself to turn around. A tall, hulking figure stood in the open doorway. The wind splattered rain onto the tile floor around his booted feet. He kicked the door shut as he moved toward her. He covered her mouth roughly with his hand, squelching her scream. Through her parted lips, she could taste the warm flesh of his palm.

The candles provided only pockets of light in the huge hall, yet she could tell his eyes were a rare blue, a blue that verged on violet. They stared at her from beneath the sopping brim of his hat. “I’m going to remove my hand, and then you are going to tell me what you are doing in my house.”

He released her and leaned back, propping himself against the wall. His impossibly thick lashes lowered. He looked as if he’d fallen instantly asleep. She no longer felt the urge to scream. The man’s misery was palpable. And even with the bruised dark hollows beneath his eyes and the pallor of his skin, she could not help noticing how handsome he was.

“I assure you, sir, you have most definitely lost your way,” she said, speaking gently as if he were a wounded beast. She moved to the door and took hold of the latch. She opened the door, desperate to have him out. “You see, this is my home. I am Lady Blackwood.” She instantly regretted having told this intimidating stranger her identity.

His lashes fluttered upward, and it took a moment for his eyes to focus. He cocked one black eyebrow in question. “Very amusing,” he drawled. His eyes drifted shut again. She watched his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed hard. “Now, if you would be so kind as to summon Henry and that bastard of a son of his to come and help me to my room, I would appreciate...” His voice trailed off as he slid down the wall.

Jessie stepped carefully over his lifeless form before racing into the parlor.

Lewis slept slouched in the big chair before a dying fire. His chin was pressed into his chest. A thin thread of drool trickled from the corner of his mouth.

“Lewis,” she said and gave his arm a pinch. She wrinkled her nose at the sour smell of alcohol. He blinked several times before seeming to register her presence.

“What the devil?”

“There’s an intruder—a madman—in the entrance hall. With shoulders like this.” She spread her hands wide apart. “Ghostly pale. Unusual eyes—tinged with violet.”

With a frown, he swiped a hand across his mouth. “You’ve let a madman inside, and you’re cataloging his attributes.” With a groan, he slung his legs off the ottoman. “Violet eyes?”

She was sure she heard a quiver in his voice. “Yes. They are absolutely beautiful.” She prodded him to stand up. “He claims this is his house.”

The color drained from his cheeks. “It’s Blackwood. Damn it to hell. Has he escaped?”

She swallowed hard. Sprawled across the marble floor was the man who Lewis often gloated was imprisoned for life. “I fear there is something wrong with him. He collapsed.”

The man still lay where she’d left him. They peered down at him. He looked dangerous even in his inert state. Fear made her clutch at Lewis’s coat. Lewis leaned over, lifted the man’s arm and let it drop hard to the floor. There was only the tiniest quiver of the man’s eyelids. The viciousness of Lewis’s action made her release her hold on his coat.

“Dead drunk,” he sneered. He moved to the man’s feet and took hold of his ankles. He grunted with effort as he tugged him a couple of inches toward the door. “Help me get the whoreson outside.”

“There’s a storm. He’s soaked through already. He’ll catch his death.”

“Would you rather have a convicted murderer waking up in your home?”

“Whatever else he may be, he is your cousin,” she reminded him.

“And your husband,” he said with a nasty chuckle. She shuddered at the thought.

Lewis purposely knocked him against the doorjamb on the way to the parlor. Unable to lift him onto the settee, they were forced to leave him on the parlor rug. Breathing hard, Lewis plunked himself onto the settee. Jessie put her hands to her back and stretched. The man was huge.

Noticing that he’d begun to shiver, she fed the meager fire. If he was truly Lord Blackwood, why the perplexed look when she’d told him her name? According to her stepfather, Lord Blackwood had arranged it all. She had been told that he’d eagerly signed the marriage certificate to protect the estate, to make certain it would remain in safe hands while he was in prison.

"I'm off to tell Father. I pray he's lucid. I do not want to handle this alone," Lewis said and heaved himself off the couch. "If it weren't for the drenching rain, I'd go out and get the constable tonight. Have him manacled and returned to prison. Perhaps they will hang him this time and be done with it."

True to his self-serving nature, Lewis thought nothing of leaving her alone with this formidable stranger. "Fetch some blankets," she called after him.

She fell to her knees beside the shivering man. Using all of her strength, she rolled him to his side and pulled on the sleeve of his rough woolen coat. Nearly panting from the effort, she finally removed the coat. She was about to toss it aside when he seized her wrist. She gasped at both the suddenness and the pain of his grip.

"Give me that," he said. His voice was low and rough.

Fear stole her breath and set her heart racing. He had enough strength in one of his big hands to snap her neck. She uncurled her fingers and dropped the jacket onto his chest. He released her wrist and, although barely conscious, fished through his pockets and retrieved a small druggist bottle labeled laudanum. After removing the cork, he dribbled some of the elixir between his lips. Though his hands trembled, he put the stopper in the bottle with care as though he were capping liquid gold. He replaced the bottle in the pocket and there was the sound of glass clinking against glass. Jessie wondered if his pockets were filled with goods from the apothecary. He folded the wet coat and trapped it beneath his head. His eyes drifted shut. Apparently, now that he'd had his dose of opium he was perfectly indifferent to the possibility of freezing to death in his soaked clothing.

Her first wifely duty, it seemed, was to undress her husband, though she'd always envisioned performing the task under more romantic circumstances. As she brushed his long wet hair back from his temple, Jessie could see he had the type of face that could steal a woman's breath away.

She tried to forget how handsome he was as she concentrated on removing his shirt. His body felt hard through the linen fabric. She blinked a few times at the musculature she exposed. He was built like an underfed gladiator. It seemed a muscular strength built from hard labor, not from nourishment. She traced her fingers over the scars that marred the sleek skin of his chest. A particularly wicked scar scored the skin beneath his ribcage. With a shudder, she daringly ran her fingers along it.

She quickly pulled her hand away as her stepfather stumbled into the room followed by Lewis. The old man blanched at the sight of the half-naked man. Once he'd

determined that the man was insensible, he shambled toward him. His face went a shade paler, and he reached back to brace himself on the arm of a chair.

“It is true then. The devil has escaped his shackles,” he said in a trembling voice.

“Henry!” Jessie spoke sharply. “He thought it a jest when I told him who I was. He initiated the proxy marriage, did he not?”

Henry’s frail frame quivered as his watery eyes continued to focus on his nephew.

She got to her feet. “You told me that it was his signature on the marriage certificate.”

“Indeed, it is his signature,” Henry replied, refusing to meet her gaze.

She looked down at Lord Blackwood. The trembling in his limbs had lessened. She suspected it was due more to the laudanum than the warmth of the fire.

Taking the blankets from Lewis, she scrutinized his face. “Lewis, did he know what he was signing?”

He thrust out his chin and sucked his bottom lip between his teeth as he usually did when caught in a lie.

“My God.” Her throat nearly strangled on the words. “You tricked him into this marriage, didn’t you? This man has no idea he has a wife.”

“I’m not afraid of him.” Lewis let out a nervous giggle. “The man’s pathetic. Drunk as a bloody lord.”

“Yes, the bloody lord of this manor,” she said, her voice edged with hysteria.

Lewis shoved past his father, escaping the room.

She reached out and grabbed Henry’s elbow, steadying him before he toppled over. “What will Lord Blackwood think when he finds he has been duped? ’Tis surely a good reason to commit another murder. And I don’t think any court would convict him this time.”

Henry seemed to look right through her. His eyes were now as empty as a cloudless sky. He pursed his lips and whistled tunelessly. Cold, wet and tired, she was in no mood to coddle her stepfather back to reality. Jessie tucked a blanket around Lord Blackwood and led her stepfather away.



Ryder moaned and squinted into the daylight. It flooded the room unimpeded by prison bars. Surveying his surroundings, he tried to remember where he was. Cautiously, he stood, hoping to stall the inevitable headache. He swept his coat from the floor. Disturbed, the dust motes swirled over the familiar furnishings. The aroma of frying bacon drifted into the musty room, wakening a long-forgotten feeling of homesickness.

The evening had left little of an imprint on his mind. He could vaguely remember his uncle's voice and the insipid face of his cousin. And the woman, no doubt, was an opiate-induced vision. Evidently, the druggist had cooked up a quality batch of laudanum. Hallucinations had never been part of his experience before. But a beautiful vision like that was more than welcome. Ryder, for once, felt pity for those who did not indulge.

He made his way through the house. With disgust, he observed the buckling wallpaper of the hallway, the tarnished silver vase on the side table and the waxy blobs of cheap, tallow candles clinging to the sconces. There wasn't a servant in sight. Clearly, Lewis did not want to waste money on servants when it could be so much better spent at billiards or Faro.

In the dining room, his uncle and cousin, the two people he hated more than the guards at Newgate, were making themselves comfortable at his table.

"You look unwell, Nephew," Henry said, nervously licking his thin lips.

"Truly, and I thought that that five year luxury holiday you sent me on had done me a world of good."

"You have the pallor of a cadaver." The thin lips drew into a hopeful smile.

Ryder yanked out two chairs and sat down hard in one while propping his feet on the other. "You'd better make arrangements for three caskets, old man. I intend to take you both with me."

His uncle looked aghast but wisely held his tongue.

Meanwhile, Lewis sat mutely at one end of the table. With fierce concentration, he slathered marmalade on toast.

"Do not get too used to breathing free air, Nephew. It is only a matter of time before they haul you back."

"I didn't bloody escape, you old fool. They released me."

"But why?" Lewis's sullen mouth was shiny with butter.

"Because they could no longer deny the fact that I am innocent."

"Innocent?" Lewis repeated, his voice lilting into a question.

Ryder resisted the urge to wipe the sour expression off his cousin's face. His gaze skipped over the food arrayed on the table. "I thought for sure that all the servants had fled." He wasn't hungry but strong tea held some appeal. He reached behind him and tugged the bellpull.

Ryder was growing bored waiting for the servant to respond when the door finally swung open, and a woman strode in carrying a tray with eggs, bread and tea. He actually pressed his fingers to his eyes for a moment, convinced she was a mirage. But she kept moving toward him. She set the tray in front of him, making eye contact for a fleeting second. Her eyes were a pale, exotic green shadowed by heavy dark lashes. He hadn't seen a female so alluring in...well...forever. She had the kind of body that could stop a man's heart.

Without a word to Henry or Lewis, she plucked the dirty dishes from the table. They did not acknowledge her either, reinforcing the notion that Ryder truly had conjured her. His hand smoothed over the bottle in his pocket. Perhaps a swig would make the hallucination last. She leaned over him to pour tea and with an unobtrusive movement he shifted his shoulder so that it grazed her breast. He inhaled the sweet scent of her. She *was* real, and he had the erection to prove it. Suddenly, he looked at Lewis. Was it possible that a wretched loser like his cousin could be wed to a woman like this?

"She is most assuredly not a servant. Who is she?" he asked with feigned nonchalance, bracing himself for an answer he did not want to hear.

Father and son exchanged looks that made Ryder uneasy. The question had made the girl freeze in her steps. A moment later she rushed off with the dirty dishes.

"That is my stepdaughter, Jessie," Henry finally muttered.

She didn't belong to Lewis. Ryder felt an uncommon sense of relief.

"You remarried while I was at Newgate?"

Henry cleared his throat and wiped his double chin. "Yes. Did you think I was supposed to stop living just because you were in prison?"

"I stopped living. It seems like you two bastards should have suffered some." Ryder glanced around at his pitifully altered surroundings. "Although, this place does not look much better than Newgate."

"Blame Dresley. The man was clearly an inept bailiff. "

"Ballocks! Dresley was the finest steward I've ever employed. But damn his eyes for leaving the estate in the hands of you two imbeciles."

Ryder then focused his fury on Lewis. He placed his father's timepiece on the table and took satisfaction in watching his cousin's eyes nearly bulge out of his head.

Lewis blinked fearfully at the pocket watch as though he expected it to attack. "Where the hell did you get that?"

"Why don't you tell me, Cousin?"

Lewis narrowed his eyes and really studied Ryder for the first time since he'd entered the dining room. "That was you hiding in the dark of the gaming hall like a thieving highwayman."

Ryder's lips curled slyly. "You are finished gambling away my family's possessions. Nothing else leaves this house—do you understand?" He wished he could shake the lethargy and remove both his uncle and cousin bodily from the premises. But the opiate drew the spirit from him.

Lewis leapt to his feet, knocking his chair into the wall. He spun on his heels and fled the room.

"Well, Uncle, where is your wife?"

"Clarissa is gone. She died two winters past." He said it in a flippant manner.

"That was number three, wasn't it? A person might think that you were doing them in yourself."

"That is preposterous." Henry's face went red and his jowls quivered with anger. "You've a soul as black as Satan's."

"Calm down, Uncle. A man of your age and with your explosive temper could be struck down by apoplexy in a thrice." He felt a ruffle of air as the door opened then heard a light feminine step behind him. His cruel words had not been meant for her ears. He expected a scolding look and almost felt it was deserved. But, instead, she gave him an unconvincing frown. He had been so deprived of anything beautiful or good for the last five years he could not draw his gaze from her.

Jessie walked toward him. The simple dress she wore clung to her slim curves. She was so sensual he felt himself grow achingly hard again just watching her glide toward him. He adjusted his coat, covering his erection. Opium, which usually kept lust at bay, seemed to be having no effect on him today. He groaned inwardly, imagining his hands cupping her perfect round breasts, rubbing his thumbs over what he felt sure would be rose-colored nipples.

"You're not hungry, Lord Blackwood?"

He shook his head and pushed the plate away. He was hungry all right, but not for the cold toast and rubbery eggs on his plate. He wanted to pull her into his lap, press that sweet bottom against his cock and clamp his mouth on a delicious nipple.

He took a shuddering breath. He needed his crutch. He removed the bottle from his pocket and set it before him. She cast him a disapproving look. The erotic goddess was a tad sanctimonious for his taste. With a wink, he toasted her with the bottle then took a drink. She snatched up his plate and flounced out of the room. Her exit was followed by a loud crash.

He quickly decided that she was the last thing he bloody well needed. The mere sight of her, and he lost all composure. He'd be suffering with a stiff prick until he had her out of his house. Why the devil *was* she here? Dowry or not, a woman like that had suitors groveling at the door. How could she not prefer marriage to living with these insufferable relatives of his?

Ryder relaxed back. The door flew open, and there she was again, glaring down at him.

Ryder thought it a bit of an overreaction for not touching his meal or for the breaking of a few plates. She twisted around, aiming her wrath at Henry.

"Will you tell him or shall I?" she asked Henry.

"What, tell your husband that his wife is a sinful harlot?"

"Tell him the truth, Henry," she responded with surprising calm.

Damn it, so she was married to his cousin, after all. Being locked in a wedded state could be the only explanation why such a luscious creature would stay at Tesslyn Hall. "Let's bring that cuckold Lewis back in and see what he thinks of that," Ryder said.

His uncle snorted with derision.

She rolled her gaze to the ceiling. "And now I am saddled with a third madman."

"But this madman can do things to a sweet harlot like yourself that you might find much to your liking. We could even let your husband watch." Ryder put his hand out to touch her, and she stepped easily from his reach. Strangely, her rejection angered him. This development did not please him. He preferred a cocoon of numb indifference.

"Oh that would be an extraordinary feat," she said with a laugh. "I applaud your ambition. From my vantage it seems you could accomplish very little in your state."

"I've been described in many ways." He sat back in his chair to give her an unobstructed view of his erection. "*Very little* has never been one of them." He knew his

response was nonsensical, that she really wasn't sizing him up. But he couldn't resist the opportunity to make a suggestive comment. The extreme envy he was feeling toward his cousin was a spark of unwanted emotion. The sarcasm seemed to ooze from him.

"I assume you picked up those gracious manners in Newgate."

"I can't credit all my elegant conduct to my incarceration," he responded with a sardonic smile. He couldn't stop himself from behaving like a beast. The combination of the opiate and the utterly bewitching wench standing in front of him was overloading his senses and diminishing his judgment.

Ryder picked up the apothecary bottle and rotated it, seriously contemplating taking a second dose. Out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed his uncle trying to slither away. "Where are you going, old man? This is just beginning to be entertaining."

His uncle peered at him over his shoulder. His eyes had taken on a glassy vacancy. Ryder had a sudden revelation that the man's mind for this moment was as blank as his eyes. The parallel struck him. Though the narcotic never voided Ryder's mind of thoughts, his emotions were a different matter. There were times when he felt absolutely nothing. Even now his boiling hatred for his uncle had cooled to a simmer.

Ryder reached lazily across the table for the teapot and knocked the sugar dish to the floor. The crystals on the pine planks seemed to form an elaborate pattern. Obviously, he'd overindulged. Usually he expected only relief from the raw sensation of his nerves being gnawed. But now he was actually experiencing flashes of euphoria.

A petite black boot swept the sugar aside, and he raised his heavy head and stared up at her. He found himself mesmerized by her eyes as his thoughts slowed. The blinking of her heavy lashes seemed in harmony with the speed of his pulse. How deep the dip was in her upper lip. How adorable the light sprinkling of freckles on her pert nose.

His lids grew heavy. "Damn, but you are lovely." He didn't feel the words exiting his mouth, but he definitely heard them. It was as though the sentiment had escaped his thoughts. He rested his eyes for only a moment and when he opened them she was gone.

Maybe she truly was only a dream.



Jessie rubbed her tired eyes. The page of the ledger was starting to blur. She blew the ink dry on the last column of numbers and placed the accounts with the invented

calculations atop the stack on the desk before returning the real book to the cabinet. And what had all her hard work been for? She'd managed to keep the estate out of thieving hands only to find that the rightful owner was undeserving. She tucked the key in her cleavage and opened the window to let the morning breeze into the stuffy room.

Heavy smoke erupting from the gatehouse chimney caught her attention. In all the time she'd lived at Tesslyn Hall, no one had occupied the ancient building.

She wondered which of the selection of fine gentlemen stoked the hearth? After all, having the noblest of humans as her housemates—an unscrupulous gamester, a madman, and now a murderer—she could only guess which one was attempting to set fire to the gatehouse.

The wet grass soaked through her slippers as she marched across the lawn. What if she were to find Lord Blackwood inside? Would she have the nerve to enter? The man was uncivilized, almost brutish in his behavior. Not a wonder, she thought, considering he'd come from the same bloodline as Henry.

She paused, took a deep breath for courage, and shoved open the warped door. The room was thick with smoke. Seeing the back of his black head, her resolve weakened. *'Twas better the gatehouse burn than face that searing violet gaze.* Overtaken by a fit of coughing, she attempted to muffle the sound with her hands.

He glanced over his shoulder. "Ah, my hallucination has returned," he said as he got to his feet. The smoke swirled around him, giving him an otherworldly quality, like an all-too-tempting demon risen from hell. His unfashionably long hair skimmed his shoulders, the gleaming midnight black of it a startling contrast to the white of his shirt. She'd heard rumors that Lord Blackwood was impossibly handsome, but she had no idea that being in his presence would be this unsettling. He was not unmarked from his time at Newgate, though. He was far too pale. And she had no doubt that prison had hardened not only his muscles but his soul.

"It's suffocating in here." Jessie moved to open a window. Untouched for so many years, the window would not budge.

"No warmth. Just smoke, I'm afraid. But the fire is dying now." He held up a bottle of port. "This will soothe your throat."

She took a step toward him, thinking a drink might be welcome, then stopped short. An array of intoxicating substances was arranged neatly on the table. "I'm fine," she said with a frown.

His gaze followed hers. "Perhaps you'd like to try something different." He picked up a clay pipe then smiled wickedly. "From that prim scowl, I'm assuming not." He set the pipe back down. "I'm not that inclined to share, anyhow."

Against her better sense she felt the need to confront him. "Surely, it is not becoming for a viscount to indulge in such a base habit."

He dropped back onto the dusty settee. "Hush. A hallucination should not nag. It ruins the effect."

"Now that you are home, won't you consider giving it up?"

He laughed. "Splendid idea. I'll start tomorrow." He reached for the pipe and started packing it with a mixture of tobacco and a blackish substance which Jessie assumed was opium.

"'Tis none of my concern. Don't let me stop you, continue to wallow in your decadence." In truth, she had the urge to sweep all his substances into the hearth.

"Why don't you go scold your husband? He has wicked habits of his own. Although considering how sinfully arousing his wife is—" his heated gaze made her feel naked, "—pleasuring her should be more than enough vice. And yet Lewis seems too stupid to partake."

"We haven't seen you in two days. I'm surprised you managed to shake off your stupor long enough to know who slept where."

He tapped the pipe on the table to pack down the contents. "In my defense, it was only a semi-stupor—" and he actually had the audacity to grin, "—and it is amazing what you can and can't hear in a deathly quiet house. I certainly wouldn't kick you out of my bed for a few indiscretions."

Blast Henry and his ravings. Now Lord Blackwood assumed she was wed to Lewis and that she was an adulterer. Jessie didn't know which of those assumptions she found more distasteful. "What a free-thinking man you are," she congratulated him. "I wonder if you would truly be so liberal with your own wife."

"Never given it much thought." He used his tinderbox to light his pipe. He took a long draw then paused before exhaling. The foreign scent mingled unpleasantly with the musty smell of the room.

"Perhaps you ought," she said.

Inhaling seemed to take effect faster than drinking. He was already resting his head back against the settee. She waited until he took one more puff before springing the news

on him. Surely he wouldn't have the energy to throttle her, and she could easily outrun him, if need be. "I'm not Lewis's wife. I'm yours."

A deep lazy laugh rumbled from his throat. "First I'm seeing things and now I'm hearing things. I could've sworn you said you were my wife."

Surely this man would have them all arrested for fraud, but it had to be said. "I'm afraid I am all too real and we are legally wed."

He lifted his head slowly from the settee backrest. His expression sobered for a moment. "How's that?"

Her gaze flitted to the door and she gauged the distance. She wouldn't be caught in this sordid tangle if it hadn't been for her stepfather. Henry had been persistent, pleading with her on behalf of his nephew. Lord Blackwood was desperate for the union. Lord Blackwood feared that his estate would fall into the hands of unscrupulous relations, he'd said. But she had been persistent as well, refusing to tie herself to a murderer. Her defiance was soon met with brutality, and with a heavy heart she'd finally submitted. That was when she realized there couldn't be more unscrupulous relations than Henry and Lewis.

"We were married by proxy. Your signature is on the certificate," she said as she began skirting the table.

"Impossible. I would remember signing a marriage certificate."

She raised a disbelieving brow and stared pointedly at his elixirs.

Rather than lunge at her as she'd expected, he slumped back. "Get out," he said in a chilling tone that sent her fleeing.

Chapter Three

Her hands coated in dirt, Jessie swiped the tears away with her sleeve. She sniffled as she ripped out another stubborn weed invading her lilac patch.

A bee flew from the blooms and zigzagged past her nose. She felt it alight in her hair. She shook her head to rid herself of it. That's when she became aware of him.

Lord Blackwood sat on one of the marble benches shaded by the ancient elm tree. His long legs were thrust out in front of him, his arms crossed over his chest. He had been watching her. And, as if mesmerized, she stared right back at him.

The entrance of this new, dangerous element into her life had jarred her. She was no longer feeling apathetic and wished to act, to shed these hateful bonds. She prayed he would spare her a prison sentence, because being pursued by the law made any future plans frightening to contemplate. But judging from what she'd witnessed so far, there was little chance. It was doubtful that mercy tempered his ruthless heart.

Jessie tried to concentrate on the flowerbed again. In her nervousness, she pulled at a perfect daffodil, leaving behind the stringy weed. "Blast it," she muttered and got to her feet. With a brusque movement, she brushed the dirt from her hands. It was impossible to even think with that man so near. She decided to take a ride on Titus before she ended up destroying her entire garden.

She took a surreptitious peek at the lounging lord. He was now lying atop the stone seat, his booted feet propped on the second bench. A slight breeze ruffled the leaves of the elm, shaking loose rainwater from yesterday's storm. The water drizzled down on him and he didn't stir. A momentary reprieve, she thought, and headed toward the stalls.

Titus greeted her with a friendly nuzzle. He was the only agreeable male on the entire estate. She threw on his bridle and led him out to the sunny field adjacent to the barn. Spring rains had covered the pasture with clover. She gave Titus a few minutes to devour a patch of it before lifting up her dress and springing onto his back. She had a momentary thought to ride off on him and escape her fate.

As they galloped the length of the lawn and back, her hair burst loose from its chignon and fell in soft waves to her waist. In the field, she cantered the huge gelding around in circles. Finally, unable to resist, she glanced in the direction of Lord Blackwood and noticed that he'd shifted positions. He straddled the bench, his forearms resting on his thighs. He'd napped briefly, and now he was watching her again. The ride had helped calm her nerves. She decided she should go and talk to this man, her husband, to find out what he intended to do with her.

Perhaps, if she set him off balance as she had earlier when he'd coarsely pointed out his erection, she could use it to her advantage. Surely, he'd intended to shock her, but she'd seen it as a tiny conquest. Flirting, she decided, might prove useful. But first she would try reasoning with him.



Ryder watched the little trickster striding purposefully toward him as though intent on speaking her mind. Obviously, he'd ruined her plans. And she'd ruined his. Ryder had sought oblivion for the day. It had taken an hour to clear his mind of the haze and absorb the impact of her announcement. He'd been royally duped. And now she was going to be royally fucked. He wondered if she was prepared to suffer the consequences for her conniving.

She and his uncle certainly hadn't anticipated that he would survive Newgate. Once he'd had his fill of her wifely attentions, Ryder would see all three of them brought before the court.

"Quality horseflesh," he said as she came within several feet of where he sat. "That animal must have cost a pretty bit."

"No need to fret, my lord. The money did not come from your coffers." Her bottom lip jutted out petulantly. "I traded for him. You see, the horse has an aversion to men. He tends to throw off any male who tries to ride him. The man who owned Titus was glad to be rid of him."

"What on earth did you trade? Or, perhaps, I know." Her beautiful big eyes blinked at him innocently. He allowed himself a greedy survey of her delicious body. After all, she was his wife, and he intended to have her before he had her put in shackles. Or, perhaps, he would try that in reverse order. Thanks to her scheme, he was legally free to do as he pleased with her.

The innocent façade vanished. Anger now sparked in the depths of her green eyes.

“Would you like to hear what I had to do to get that horse?” She stepped closer, and, with enticing slowness, inched up her dress revealing her half-boots and then her knee-high silk stockings. The hem soon skimmed the tops of her long, perfect legs. She straddled the end of the marble bench, her spread knees nearly touching his. The soft fabric of her dress pooled between her bared thighs, keeping her cunt hidden from him, but his breath quickened nonetheless.

She leaned closer and locked gazes with him. He felt a physical wreck.

“Well?” she said in a soft, provocative voice. He barely heard her through the pounding in his ears.

“Hmmm?” he asked, his mind racing with sinful thoughts.

“Would you like to hear about my trade with the plowmen?”

Hell’s fire, she was a shameless little doxy. “Indeed.” His gaze raked over her wantonly positioned body before returning to her face.

“It was a simple arrangement. They were hired to scythe the field. Every night for a week I would ride to their camp. The fire would be blazing.” Her delicate fingers unbuttoned the top two buttons of her pastel blue dress, and fanned her exposed cleavage. “It would feel very hot against my skin.”

It was all Ryder could do to keep from reaching forward to grab her hips, lift her onto his lap and grind her against his throbbing cock.

“The men would sit around the campfire passing around a jug of ale. The fair-haired one with the big capable hands would be playing a slow, melancholy tune on the fiddle. I always came clad in a thin shift with nothing at all beneath. After a little ale, I would let the shift slide off my shoulders and down my body until it puddled at my feet. And there I would stand, surrounded by all these men, utterly naked.” She paused and looked at him for a long, breath-stealing moment.

“One of the men would carry me to the back of a wagon filled with soft bedding.”

Ryder found himself looking at the front of her dress, wondering how quickly he could rip it open and have her completely nude. He wanted to devour every inch of her.

“Shall I continue, Lord Blackwood?” she asked in a sultry tone.

Ryder swallowed hard. “If you’d like,” he finally managed to say, his voice sounding rough to his ears. His cock was aching with need, and she hadn’t even touched him.

“There I would lie atop the quilts, slightly drunk and completely vulnerable. The men would pitch rocks to see who would have me first. I was always glad when Thomas won because his hands were so talented. He would rub me with a sweet-scented, warm oil—”

He sat up straight. “What kind of a plowman has a stock of scented oil on hand?”

She stared at him as though annoyed with the interruption. “Thomas used it for his raw, callused hands. Truth be told, the oil really didn’t soften them much. They were still excitingly rough.” She made a move to button up her bodice. “If I’m boring you.”

“Actually, I’m highly entertained.” He marveled at the evenness of his tone. His cock was so entertained that if she didn’t finish the story he might provide his own ending. He tugged on his trousers.

The minx dropped her gaze demurely to his crotch. She glanced up in a hurry. “How flattering to think that my little story could entertain a man with your history.” She brought both of her hands up and caressed her long, graceful neck. “Thomas would start at my throat and then he would massage lower, his rough hands making my skin tingle.” Her pink tongue traced over her upper lip as her hands smoothed over her shoulders and the tops of her round, alabaster breasts. “He would insist that I part my legs until they nearly trembled. And then he would touch me here.” Now her hand pressed provocatively at the vee at the top of her thighs so teasingly veiled by her dress. “There were times, of course, that I would play coy—” she fluttered her sable lashes, “—and then Thomas would call for assistance. One man would hold me down while the other explored.”

Ryder could not suppress a groan as his erection pushed against the fabric of his snug-fitting trousers.

“Of course, the rest you can imagine,” she said with a sweet smile. With feline grace, she lifted herself off the bench and smoothed her dress down.

A new, thoroughly possessive feeling overtook him. He leapt to his feet. “And did you do all this while married to me?”

“Surely, the idea doesn’t offend you? When you believed me Lewis’s wife you thought he should share me without complaint.”

The fog of opium had completely dissipated and his emotions were intensifying. He felt an acute stab of jealousy. “I asked you a question, woman. Did you couple with those men while bound to me?”

“You wish it so, I am sure, so that you can more easily dissolve the marriage. I am sorry to disappoint you then, because I’ve made the whole thing up. I taught Thomas’s children to read, so he gave me Titus.” Her beautiful green eyes were glossed with tears. She picked up her skirt and raced back to the garden.



Jessie was sobbing by the time she dashed into the ancient courtyard. The surrounding walls were crumbling, but the flowering vines she had planted to cover them made it an inviting place to sit and read, or in this situation to hide.

She pressed her heated face against the cool stone wall. Suggesting that she had made a whore of herself to get a horse still made her shake with rage. But it had been dangerous to trifle with such a daunting man. Especially one who had complete control over her future. The saucy flirting had been a reckless experiment that she ought not have tried.

How had she dared that performance? She knew nothing of sexual matters beyond what she’d witnessed while traveling the world with her parents. On a few occasions, she’d spied erotic rituals performed by members of native tribes.

Avenging her honor had proved almost too successful. When he’d groaned, she was sure she’d gone too far. She’d feared he would snatch her up and ravish her there on the lawn. But she’d been similarly affected. The hunger in his violet-blue eyes had sent warmth spiraling in her lower belly.

Jessie walked over to the marble urn planted with yellow roses. She plucked off a wilted blossom and stroked the soft petals over her wet cheeks. Suddenly, her skin prickled. She could feel the heat of him at her back. Pivoting to face him, she found herself staring at his chest. Lord Blackwood reached around her and removed a dying bloom as well. He enfolded it in his big fist. She understood the message—he could crush her as easily as the rose. She craned her neck to look up into his face. His eyes were narrowed in angry warning.

“What game are you playing, woman?”

“I have no idea what you mean,” she said and took a small step to the side. If she needed to run she wasn’t about to plow through her patch of lavender. It had taken her too long to grow.

“You know damn well what I mean.” He slowly opened his hand and the petals drifted to the dirt. “No matter the lies you tell me. It will be nothing to have this marriage pronounced invalid. Then I intend to have the lot of you carted off to prison.” His words were delivered with terrifying precision.

“Well, I suppose I should be grateful that you don’t intend to kill me.” Her back was nearly against the wall. She took several mincing steps to the side.

Rage flared in his eyes. “Do not tempt me,” he said.

As a few more discreet steps put her nearly out of his reach, his hand snaked out, wrapped around her arm and drew her back.

“At this moment, I have other plans for you.”

“I assure you, Lord Blackwood, I had no idea you were being deceived.” Her voice shook. “I was told you’d requested the marriage. That you wanted to ensure that the Blackwood lands were well cared for in your absence.”

He seized both of her wrists and lifted them above her head, clamping them against the wall. He leaned over and whispered in her ear, “You lying little bitch.” He ground his pelvis into her, his rock hard shaft pushing against her stomach.

Swallowing hard, she stared up into violet eyes shadowed by long black lashes. “I do not deserve to be treated this way. They tricked me as well.”

“*This*, coming from the lips of a woman who just taunted me with an erotic lie.” He shoved his thigh between her legs, lifting her to her toes. She lost her breath for a moment and tried to wriggle out of his grasp. Her struggles caused her to rub intimately against the muscles of his thigh. She could feel herself getting moist with excitement. Embarrassed, she glanced up to see if he’d felt her reaction to him. He had. His lips were curled into a crooked, cocky smile.

He transferred both her wrists to one hand. Her fingers were beginning to tingle. Slowly, he moved his newly freed hand down the bare skin of her raised arm. His fingers trailed lower, tracing the top edge of her stays, which lifted her breasts like an offering. He circled the tip of his thumb around her taut nipple. She could feel the warmth of his touch through the thin muslin of her dress. She should have demanded that he let her go, but, instead, her treacherous body arched toward his hand. “Please,” was all she managed to utter. It sounded like she was begging for more rather than asking him to stop. He dipped his head and lightly bit her erect nipple through the thin fabric of her dress. She moaned in sweet pleasure.

He pushed his hand between their bodies and yanked up her dress and petticoats until there was nothing between her naked nether lips and the material of his trousers. He rubbed his leg back and forth so that she could feel the fine woolen fabric against the tender folds of her quim. If he were to release her wrists, she would surely fall in a dizzy heap at his feet. His rough handling of her should have frightened her, but instead she wanted more of it. She found him utterly compelling.

His thigh lifted her higher so that her feet dangled in the air. He pressed the side of his face against hers. The blue-black bristles shadowing his jaw were rough against her cheek. His deep voice resonated through her entire being as he spoke in her ear. "I had my uncle hand over the marriage document. You are legally my wife—for now. And I intend to have you in my bed tonight. And for as long as I wish." He swept his tongue along the curl of her ear.

Lifting his head, he stared down at her as a wolf regards his prey. He flicked his tongue seductively in the slight cleft of her chin then ran it boldly over the seam of her lips. Craving his kiss, she parted her lips.

"You'd better be ready for tonight, sweeting, because your dangerous game is just getting started." He breathed the words into her mouth, his lips grazing hers as he spoke. Then his tongue was inside her mouth tasting her deeply. She responded by rubbing her small tongue over his. He pulled back suddenly and set her on her feet. Gripping the rough wall with her fingertips, she kept herself from crumbling to the ground.

His chest was heaving. He stared at her as if bewildered, then turned hard on his heels and stalked away.

Jessie stared at the broken rose. Would she allow him to do the same to her heart?

Chapter Four

Carrying a tray of tea, Jessie passed Henry scuttling down the hallway toward the parlor, his books on the black arts clutched to his chest.

“Won’t you have something to eat, Henry?”

He curled his back, hunching his shoulders over his precious tomes as though he were afraid she’d pluck them from his grip. “Must you always disturb my thoughts? Impertinent baggage.” He hastened his pace. His behavior had become even more erratic since Lord Blackwood’s return.

In the dining hall she set down the tea and tied back the heavy curtains allowing sunlight into the room. She fingered the empty brandy glass on the table. It could only belong to Lord Blackwood, since Lewis had ridden off immediately after breakfast. She eyed the brandy decanter. Not a drop remained. Food did not hold much interest for the viscount. His vices fortified him. Opium followed by a flood of liquor. More than likely, he’d taken himself upstairs and collapsed atop his freshly made bed. She hoped he would be insensible for the rest of the day and on through the night. The possibility of having to sleep in his bed and submit to his demands terrified and thrilled her all at once. He was convinced she was as much to blame for the marriage ruse as his uncle and cousin. And he was seeking retribution for the wrongs he thought she’d done him. The *punishment* he’d dealt her in the garden still sent shivers of pleasure through her body.

After enjoying a peaceful meal alone, Jessie packed two straw baskets with the herb loaves she’d baked that morning and set out to the barn to saddle Titus. Lord Blackwood had upset her normal schedule. Her visit would be later than usual, but hopefully not so late that she would face the wrath of Retscliff, the innkeeper. Or worse, have Lucy suffer for it. Jessie still cringed, thinking of the terrible thumping Retscliff had given Lucy, merely because she’d accepted Jessie’s meager offering. Retscliff had flung the cake and ground it into the dirt. Blaming herself, Jessie had vowed not to return. After all, her visits had started as an ease to her conscience, a sort of penance for her husband’s crimes.

But after Lucy had risked venturing to Tesslyn Hall, the bruises still fresh on her cheeks, it occurred to Jessie that they were kindred spirits.

Jessie adjusted the cowl of her cape so it hung far over her face, giving her anonymity.

Titus needed no prodding. He knew the route too well. It was a good thing because Jessie had a difficult time thinking of anything other than the far too big, far too handsome viscount.

Jessie gave the deep hood one last tug to make certain her features were obscured and reined the horse in at the rear of the tavern. The weathered, splintered door sandwiched between soot-caked windows spoke of utter despair and oppression. The rope ladder that dangled from the upstairs balcony swayed in the breeze. An easy escape for adulterous men. She cued Titus to snort three times.

The door opened, and Lucy stepped into the narrow alley. She squinted against the pale, lowering sun. Lucy was not a creature of the daylight. Her blood-red lips were startling against her waxen skin. She was far too young and frail to take the abuse Retscliff dealt her.

"Jess, do not linger. He's in a monstrous foul mood today. Poor Sarah has had the worst of him."

Jessie handed the woman the baskets. "Won't you leave with me?" she asked as she did every time. But what sanctuary did she have to offer? What an arrogant notion to believe that she could save Lucy, when she couldn't even save herself.

"Soon," was the rote response.

"The night Maggie died, did you see the man who killed her?" It had never occurred to Jessie to ask the question before. Having lived with Lord Blackwood's vile relations, it had not seemed farfetched for one of their own to be a murderer.

"Aye, I saw him. A sour old man. Probably wouldn't recognize him if I were to see him again. I've had enough cranky old men to last a lifetime." She glanced nervously over her shoulder.

"So it wasn't Lord Blackwood?" She realized she wasn't truly surprised to hear of his innocence. There had been a glimmer of something honest and real that had shone through his rough exterior. She must stop this. Turning the man into a tortured romantic hero would only make her predicament worse.

Lucy stepped closer to the horse. She smelled of sweat and perfume with an odd candy-like scent. "Is he home, then?"

"Who?"

Lucy put her hand under Titus's nose and let the animal nuzzle her palm. "Your husband, Lord Blackwood."

Lucy was the only person she'd told about the marriage. Lucy knew of her stepfather's cruel coercion, of the forced alliance. It had been a shared confidence between women held captive by brutal men.

"I thought if he were out of prison he could help you. Sarah, Peg and me ran off to London one day when Retscliff drunk himself into a stupor. Truth be told, Sarah helped him along. She put a few drops of a sleeping draught in his ale." Her painted lips curled into a mischievous grin. "Anyways, we went straight away to the magistrates and told them what we knew. The constable had never questioned us before. Just took Retscliff's slimy word. Got to put my 'x' on an official document," she said proudly.

It was a daring and magnificent thing Lucy and her friends had done. Jessie wished that Lucy would use that brave spirit to free herself. She forced a smile. "Well done," she said. "Lord Blackwood has been released." But Jessie was no safer. And it wasn't the threat of arrest that worried her. It was the power the man already seemed to have over her emotions.

Lucy bustled off with the bread and returned in moments with the emptied containers. She took Jessie's hand in hers and turned it palm side up. She pressed her rouged lips against her skin, then, hearing the rattle of Retscliff's keys through the shabby walls of the inn, she hurried up the rope ladder and pulled herself over the railing of the sagging upstairs landing.

"You there! What the devil are you about?" Retscliff hollered as he slammed out of the kitchen. His lanky legs covered the distance between them in a hurry. "Don't you distract my girls. They are lazy enough as it is."

Stupidly, she could not keep silent. Her body quaking with indignation, she did not even take the precaution of backing up Titus before shouting. "You bastard, you can't own people."

"I'll prove you wrong. I'll own you, missy. If I catch you here one more time you'll be working for me." Waving a pistol, Retscliff stopped directly in her path. He was a frightening obstacle, a coward with a loaded gun.

Jessie reined the horse around and kicked him into a full gallop. The four-foot fence that bordered the adjacent woods would not be a challenge for Titus. The eager gelding picked up his pace, seeming all too delighted with the prospect of jumping. Not having had time to tie the baskets onto the saddle, Jessie hooked her arm through the handles of the unwieldy containers as she raced toward the fence. Titus's front legs went up and over. Despite the danger, Jessie laughed with exhilaration as they flew through the fresh evening air.

A loud crack echoed off the building behind her, and a sudden sharp pain made her tilt. Frantic, she clutched at the saddle and righted herself. Fortunately, the shot had not troubled her steady, sure-footed mount. Jessie rode through the thicket of trees and out of sight of the tavern and its hateful owner. She prayed Lucy would not bear the brunt of his fury.

Heading out of the darkness of the woods, she found the road. Once their pace slowed, Jessie reached back to secure the baskets to the side of the saddle. Blood trickled down her fingers. She shook off the cape and examined the wound. As she'd expected, it hadn't penetrated her arm. The pain had not been severe enough for that. Rivulets of blood dripped from where the bullet had grazed her.

The house was eerily quiet as Jessie climbed the unlit stairwell to her room. She crept with mouse-like steps through the hall so as not to disturb Lord Blackwood.

Once inside her room, she started a fire and quickly removed her blood soaked garments. Using this morning's soapy water, Jessie rinsed her arm. After shedding her chemise, she took a plaster from the dressing room cabinet. Pressing it against the shallow wound, she walked over to the fire to warm her skin. She reached for the poker and bent forward to push the largest log back into the heart of the fire.

"Perfect." The disturbingly deep voice came from a dark recess of the room.

Jessie froze in place for a moment then used her arms to shield her nakedness before turning to face him. She could make out only his silhouette sitting relaxed in her chair. His long legs were stretched out in front of him crossed at the ankles. His hands were clasped behind his head.

"Lord Blackwood I didn't expect you to be—"

"Conscious?" He supplied the word. "I reduced my dosage. I intend to experience every inch of you to the fullest."

"Such self-control," she responded sarcastically.

“Control has nothing to do with it. I have no intention of controlling myself tonight.” He motioned for her to turn around.

She had just missed having a bullet lodged in her back. Parading naked before her husband, no matter how intimidating he was, should not cause her much anguish, yet her entire body shivered. She twirled on her heels, hardly giving him a chance to view her.

“Where have you been, *wife*?” The last word was said with such disdain it was painful to hear.

Jessie struggled to appear nonchalant. “I’ve been visiting friends,” she replied.

“Friends?” he asked.

He made it sound like an accusation. She was to blame for this demeanor. She should never have provoked him with that carnal story about the plowmen.

“It was very convenient of you to disrobe, since I intend to take full advantage of my husbandly rights tonight and for at least a month.”

“A month?” she asked. So that was all the time she had to secure a future. If she weren’t successful surely she would find herself in no better situation than Lucy.

“I’m sure I will tire of you by then.”

“I’ve no doubt your unsavory habits will overtake you again and lessen your need for me. Then you will want to be rid of me sooner.” Again her mouth was putting her in peril. Thirty days would decrease to a fortnight if she didn’t hold her tongue. Her slim hope that Lord Blackwood would be more decent than the other Braddock men was quickly shrinking.

“I’ll worry about my habits. You worry about fulfilling your wifely commitments. Come closer, woman. I want to see you,” he growled.

She hesitated for a moment then willed herself forward. She could see him clearly now. She stared down at her husband’s face, the face of a stranger. His lids were heavy as he looked up at her through a thick curtain of black lashes. His scrutiny of her was merciless. Rather than feeling afraid, her breath quickened with a sudden need to be touched. He leaned over and pried away the hand still clamped over the wound. Only an angry pink line remained.

“What is it your friends do to you?” he asked.

“Anything they want,” she said in a wanton tone, instantly forgetting that he was not a man to goad.

“Let me see that circlet on your ankle,” he demanded.

Balancing on one foot she brought up her knee. He leaned forward, took hold of her foot and set it on his thigh. She felt awkward and exposed. The leg that held her weight trembled. His fingers turned the thin circle of gold around her ankle. "Does some man have a claim on you?" he said, his tone hard and unforgiving.

"It is something I brought back from my travels. I admired the adornments of a native people, and an artisan fashioned something similar for me."

"You are either a practiced liar or a whore. Or, perhaps, both. I suppose I shall discover the truth tonight."

His fingers curled around her leg, holding her fast as he reached over with his other hand and stroked her parted slit with the callused pad of his thumb. A frisson of pleasure jolted through her. She nearly keeled backward from the shock of his bold and intimate touch.

He seized her hand to steady her. "The fire is dying. Why don't you see to it?"

She nodded. As he released her, his fingers lightly grazed the palm of her hand, a simple touch that sent an exquisite shiver up her back. She could feel her nipples tighten, a physical reaction that did not escape his notice. She removed her foot from atop his thigh but slowly, relishing the musculature of his thigh.

A twinge of modesty overtook her and she reached to grab the satin wrap draped over the arm of the chair, but he snatched it first and flung it away. "I want you naked."

Jessie stood so close she could feel his breath on her skin. His carnal stare was fixed on her breasts.

"Are you cold?" He blew lightly on one of her erect nipples, making her desperate for his touch. Though she was still wary of him, unexpected desire coursed through her. He peered up at her now. His strong, square jaw and firm, well-formed mouth made him the most handsome man she had ever seen. He sat forward, his tongue rasped across her taut nipple, and she nearly collapsed into his lap. "The fire, Lady Blackwood," he reminded her.

In a daze, she approached the hearth. He'd merely run his tongue across her breast, and she was ready to melt into his arms. She bent over to stoke the fire. Behind her she could hear a moan from the man still sitting in the chair. She felt wanton knowing he was seeing every inch of her in the flesh, but somehow it didn't matter. She rather liked the feeling. As she hung the fire poker back on the brass rack, she sensed him come up behind her. His hands reached around her, and he began softly teasing her nipples with

his thumbs. She leaned back against him. His chest was now bare, but he still wore his trousers. She could feel his huge erection pressing into her back.

“I want you on your hands and knees,” he whispered into her ear. An erotic thrill ran through her body at his shocking demand. He stopped fondling her nipples and pulled the pins from her hair so that it fell like a shawl over her naked shoulders. He pointed to where he wanted her positioned.

“Obedient, little wench, aren’t you?” he said as she complied with his demand.

Her long hair draped her face, the ends skimming the rug. She turned her head to peer at him, a sly smile on her lips. “What is a wife if not a slave to her husband’s desires?” Acting the coquette was new for her. She was toying with him and enjoying it. He was too exciting a man to deny.

“Before tonight, I’d never thought of marriage as a satisfying enterprise.” His booted foot wedged between her legs, nudging them farther apart, until she was exposed and open to him. With the light of the fire, he could surely see every intimate part of her. “And this exotic little tattoo—” he traced the tiny blue star on her hip, “—is this also a souvenir from your travels?”

“Yes. I had that done in Cape Palmas.” Besides herself and the person who’d etched it into her skin, he was the only person to see it. She had not told her parents about it. “It is the work of a woman,” she added, anticipating his next question. “I doubt that it shall make any difference to you, but I am a virgin.”

“Of course,” he said with a sarcastic laugh.

She jolted when his fingers stroked the cleft of her bottom. “You have a very beautiful arse, Lady Blackwood. I think I will miss it once I kick it out onto the street.”

She sat back on her heels. “I wish you would kick me and this arse of mine out straight away.” She didn’t mean a word of it. His threat riled her. Was he toying with her, as well? Or was he making it clear this was only temporary?

He gathered up her hair, wrapped it around his fist and tugged her head back, forcing her to look up into his face. “As I said, you started this game. But now, I set the rules.” He released his hold, letting her hair slide through his fingers.

She would not allow him to wring tears from her. She would play by his rules—for a *month*. No matter how compliant her behavior, his tone did not soften. It was a mistake to leave herself unguarded. She chided herself for already letting her emotions tangle with this man who so obviously mistrusted her.

After resuming her vulnerable position, she arched her back, pushed her bottom higher and twitched it. "Perhaps, you can have it covered in bronze," she said. "Then you can have a replica of it when I am gone."

"Hmmm. The idea has merit," he said and gave her naked bottom a stinging slap.

From the shadow on the wall, she could see he was removing his trousers.

"My knees are beginning to hurt," she complained.

His response was to press her head down so that her forearms and face rested on the rug and her bottom was angled higher. She heard him drop to his knees behind her. His big hands gripped her bottom, and he ran his tongue across the folds of her nether lips. The most incredible pleasure she had ever experienced rushed through the core of her body. She could not contain her soft cries of ecstasy.

"By God, you taste sweet." He spread her cheeks and thrust his tongue into her. She nearly collapsed. He kissed her there as he had kissed her mouth. His tongue plunged again and again, licking deep inside her. She thought she might faint from the sheer pleasure of it.

Her legs grew shaky. He stood, scooped her around the waist and brought her to her feet. "You certainly don't respond like a virgin."

She could not speak to defend herself. He lifted her into his massive arms. Intoxicated by what he had done to her, her head lolled against his chest. He tossed her lightly onto the bed and brushed the hair back off her face. It was a simple gesture, yet it made her ache inside. *This man despises you*, she reminded herself. *Do not mistake this for kindness.*

He kneeled on the bed beside her. "Take my cock," he said. His erection was a tantalizing reach away. She wrapped her small hand around him and stroked the daunting length of him. Then seeing the little cream at the tip, she scooted down in the bed and angled her neck. Instinctively, she needed to taste him. Timidly, she swept her tongue along the head of his cock.

He jolted and let out a primal groan. "Don't tease. Take all of me."

She did not immediately obey. Once she'd started, she found she couldn't get enough of him. From the first taste, she craved him. She had no wish to be rushed, wanting instead to explore him thoroughly. Jessie traced the slit with the tip of her tongue then drew it along the ridge on the underside.

His labored breathing gave her the cue to continue. The power of pleasing him sent a rush of sweet heat through her. Her eager mouth molded perfectly around him as if his body had been made for her.

“No more,” he said in a broken whisper.

Reluctantly, she slid her mouth the length of his cock then feathered a kiss across the slick head.

His hands were trembling when he pushed her back down on the bed. After positioning her so her feet were firmly planted on the mattress, he nudged her knees apart. His hand stroked her inner thigh, his gaze riveted to her. Her pulse raced. Yes, she definitely enjoyed having him look at her. Not a shred of modesty remained. It seemed no demand of his was too much. She opened wider for his inspection.

“Already anticipating what I want. Someone has taught you well.”

There was no point in proclaiming her innocence again.

Her body trembled as his fingers skimmed lightly over her exposed nether lips.

“Are you afraid of me?”

“No.”

“You’re shaking.”

“Your touch gives me pleasure.”

His lips curled into a wry smile. “My compliments to your tutor. You’ve been very well schooled.”

This stranger, her husband, pressed himself down atop her. Heat enveloped her. Even though he’d propped himself on his forearms, she felt trapped beneath the weight of him. His hand shifted to her bottom, angling her to take his straining shaft. He watched her steadily as he forced an entry. She felt too tight, too small to accommodate him. A mewl of surprise escaped her lips.

“Almost convincing,” he drawled. And then with one aching hard thrust, he impaled her completely. She bit her lip to stifle her cry. He stilled his movements. His violet eyes assessed her. “I’ll be damned.”

“More than likely.” Her voice cracked with desire, diminishing, she was sure, the impact of her taunt. It felt incredible to feel the heaviness of him atop her at the same time she held him so deep and thick inside her.

He raised himself up on his arms, and the tips of his long black hair brushed gently against her face. With deliberate slowness, he moved back and forth inside her. The pain

had diminished, and she reveled in the delirious friction he was creating. Now that he no longer supported her bottom, she lifted her hips toward his instinctually, trying to absorb the full impact of his thrusts.

He stared down at her. "Why do you have to be so beautiful?"

Jessie wrapped her legs around him, squeezing him tighter with each movement. Her hands gripped his muscular arms. She was clinging to him for dear life, contracting every intimate muscle.

Blackwood's movements became more reckless, his rhythm quickened, his hot solid shaft slamming into her. She closed her eyes, her head dizzy with pleasure. His open mouth clamped over hers, catching her scream. And then he pulled out of her, spilling his seed onto her abdomen. His body shuddering, he collapsed over her. She let her hands drop away and her legs fall open. She resisted the urge to hug him tightly to her, to stroke his glossy hair. Clearly, he felt her dismissal of him and rolled off of her. The cool air chilled her abandoned body. A single tear dripped down her face, wetting the pillow. A whole month of this loveless intimacy and surely her heart would shatter.

"I'm sorry I didn't believe you," he said as he stared up at the ceiling.

"I had no reason to lie about it." She swung her legs over the bed and stood. Her legs felt wobbly as she walked to the ewer stand. She dipped a cloth in the water and washed herself.

"It was just your story about the plowmen. And you gave yourself so freely to me."

"I may have been a virgin, but I am not naïve. When my father was alive we spent a great deal of time traveling. There are people in this world who do not fear sensuality. I can assure you, I witnessed things you've never even dreamed about. And legally I am wed to you, so I had no real choice except to submit."

"Otherwise, you would not have had me. Is that it?" he asked.

"I was merely doing my wifely duty," she lied. Coupling with him was far from a duty. She liked—no, she *loved* the look of him, the scent of him, the feel of him. She wanted badly to crawl beneath the covers and cuddle against the warmth of him.

"Then you may continue to fulfill your obligations until I am finished with you," he said, his words harsh, exacting. He rose from the bed, grabbed his clothes and headed for the door.

His words were meant to punish. She threw the cloth into the basin; the water splashed angrily over the sides. “My lord? Is there anything special you would like me to prepare for your breakfast? Or will you just be eating opium again?”

She could see the muscles tense in his broad shoulders. He said nothing but nearly splintered the door as he slammed it behind him. To survive her wifely *obligations*, she would have to encase her emotions. For him, their sexual encounters would amount to compensation, a payment for the wrongs he’d suffered. For her, if she weren’t careful, and left her heart unguarded, these trysts could be her undoing.

Chapter Five

After a restless night, Ryder plodded down the staircase to the dining room. He could not stop thinking about the chit. Her lying little heart was wrapped in the most enticing, delectable package he'd ever had the pleasure to fuck. She smelled so sweet and tasted even sweeter. She was saucy, clever, and daring in bed. Completely addictive. But he could handle only one craving at a time. Her comments about his habit had stung, and he found himself ashamed about his dependency on opium.

Even as he berated himself, he stopped on a step and removed the amber bottle from his pocket. He hadn't indulged since the gatehouse, but now his whole body shuddered with aches and he needed it badly. Only a few drops, he told himself. Just enough to hold him over until he could have her again.

As he neared the dining room, he could hear Lewis's voice raised in anger.

"You were too closefisted. Had you paid for enough of the stuff, it might have put him in a permanent coma," Lewis said all too clearly.

Ryder threw open the door. Both Lewis and Henry startled, the old man spilling his tea on the white tablecloth.

"A true shame that you didn't spend my money better," Ryder said dryly as he sat across from his visibly shaken cousin.

"What are you on about?" Lewis asked sullenly.

Jessie entered quietly, her arms laden with a tray of food. Her slippers whispered over the hardwood floor. The woman who eagerly spread her legs for him last night offered him a demure smile. He had to remind himself to breathe as he faced his cousin again. "Clearly, I have you three to thank for the opium provided to me in prison."

Lewis fumbled with his napkin. "It was your own damned fault. The guards did not know how to control you. After the prison doctor gave you laudanum for a malady, they noticed how well it subdued your behavior. They considered you a dangerous character and pleaded with us to keep you supplied with a sedative."

“It wasn’t the guards who wanted me sedated. How else could you have hoodwinked me into signing the marriage certificate? And the *malady* of which you speak was a knife in the side.”

Jessie gave a cry of surprise. He glanced up at her. The color had drained from her face, and her green eyes were huge with shock. Amazing what emotions she could feign.

Henry’s lips twisted into a macabre grin. “I’d have pushed that knife into his black heart and ripped it from his chest.”

Ryder studied Jesse. She hadn’t even flinched at Henry’s gruesome statement. He turned his attention back to his cousin. “You arranged everything so nicely, a term in prison, a knife attack, a dependence on opium.” Ryder shrugged. “Shame I spoiled it all by surviving.”

“Father, you daft fool, say something in your son’s defense.”

Henry was more concerned with arranging his bits of toast and eggs into some sort of design. His eyes appeared hollow, as if emptied of a human soul.

Lewis grunted in disgust at his father. “I had nothing to do with your arrest, and you know it.” He did not refute the other accusations.

Jessie poured Ryder’s tea with her gaze averted like an indifferent servant and not like a woman who had just been naked and on all fours mere hours ago.

“You were my alibi, Lewis. You know I wasn’t at Retscliff’s tavern that night because I was settling your debts at the gaming hell.”

Lewis’s face turned crimson.

“To save your pride, you did not testify on my behalf. And what if I’d hanged? The crown might have confiscated everything.”

“They repealed the Corruption of Blood law. We wouldn’t have been tainted by the judgment placed on your head. I believe the inheritance would have been quite secure.”

“Secure in the hands of a pathetically inept gamester? Hardly.”

Lewis’s voice rose to a shriek. “I don’t have to listen to any of this.”

“And, my wretched cousin, I no longer have to provide you with a place to live. I want you out of here in a week’s time.”

Lewis gave him an incredulous look. “And where the hell am I supposed to go?”

Ryder pulled out a silver flask and poured several shots of whiskey into his tea. “You won’t have to worry about that for long. Soon you’ll be taking up residence at Newgate.

I'm sure you'll find it as cozy as I did." He flashed his cousin a smile before downing his tea mixture.

Lewis jumped to his feet, snatched up a dining room chair and hurled it across the room. Ryder's first instinct was to yank Jessie into his lap to protect her, although she was in no real danger. The chair cracked against the wall at the far end of the room.

"I'll be glad to be gone from this hellish place." His cousin, quaking with rage, glared down at Jessie. She was still neatly tucked against Ryder, her golden hair silken against his chin. She seemed in no hurry to leave his lap.

"By the way, dearest stepsister, I have another chance to sell that damn horse. And do not dare look at me like that. You've had your *opportunity* to make it right. The buyer is coming this afternoon, and the beast better be sound this time, or I will personally shoot him in the head." He stormed out.

"You are going to allow him to sell your horse?" Ryder asked.

She twisted around to face him, placing one delicate hand on his arm. "It is his horse, but I have no intention of letting Titus go anywhere."

"His horse?"

She looked exasperated by his persistent inquiries. "I had to borrow money once from Lewis long ago, so I signed Titus over to him."

Ryder was relieved that Lewis was too thick-witted to ask for sexual favors instead of a horse. And then he recalled Lewis's angry words. He quirked a brow. "What did he mean you had an opportunity to make it right?"

"You do have an evil mind, sir," she said primly.

He wasn't wholly convinced by her answer. "Why were you so desperate for money that you actually signed your beloved Titus over to him?"

"If you must know, the money was for a headstone." Now she truly looked upset, and he wished he hadn't pried. "I wanted a decent marker for my mother's grave. Satisfied?"

Tears beaded on her thick lashes. He wanted to hug her tight against his chest. What was happening to him? Reminding himself that she was nothing but a cold, calculating bitch, he wrapped his hands around her waist and plunked her down on her feet.

Jessie took a seat at the end of the table and nibbled on a piece of dry toast. She allowed the tears to trickle down her cheeks unheeded.

"Only a fool ventures there. I will not chance the witches," Henry muttered.

“What the devil are you going on about, old man?” Ryder asked angrily.

His uncle jerked up his head. He looked surprised to see anyone else in the room. “They are gathering,” he said in a sepulchral tone and pointed a gnarled finger at Jessie.

Jessie didn’t blink an eye at Henry’s utterances.

“Witches?” Ryder asked.

She dabbed some marmalade on her toast and nodded. “I’m one of them—” she hiccupped on a sob, “—but I suppose you already figured that out.”

Ryder glanced at his uncle who was now rocking back and forth and mumbling to himself. “My God, he’s raving mad,” Ryder said under his breath.

“Indeed,” she said matter-of-factly and pushed the last bite of toast between her luscious lips.

Ryder pulled the small brown bottle out of his waistcoat pocket. He shook it lightly then quickly replaced it when she gave him an admonishing look. She had an oddly moral attitude for a thief. Suddenly, he was struck by a flaw in his logic. If she were a thief and had his money at her fingertips, why did she need to sell her horse for a gravestone? Was he already trying to make excuses for her in hopes that she truly was an unwitting accomplice? Or had all his fortune already been squandered? It was time to discover the truth.

He headed into his father’s study to look at the estate’s account books. A brave thing, he thought, to pore over the ledgers while being nearly sober. He sat in the brown leather chair and ran his finger over the black singe mark left by one of his father’s cigars. The suddenness of his father’s death still pained him. He’d been told that his father, an expert shooter, had had a hunting accident. Even as a youth he’d known it to be a manufactured tale.

His gaze flicked around, taking inventory. There was a discolored rectangle on the wall where a priceless painting had once hung. The ormolu clock on the mantel was gone, along with the silver cigar box. His venal cousin had plundered the room of valuables.

With a sigh of disgust, he turned his attention to the ledgers. They were stacked neatly atop the massive walnut desk. He plucked a book from the top of the pile. As he flipped through the pages, the reality he’d feared materialized. His uncle had ruined him. Then he noticed something he hadn’t predicted. He yanked open the curtains to let in more daylight before returning to his seat. His pulse beat erratically as he drew his finger

down the column. The numbers were suspiciously neat as though written with a feminine hand. His heart sank. Henry was on the verge of lunacy and Lewis was not clever enough, which left only one culprit. His little temptress was not only a thief but the actual brains behind embezzling his estate.

His frustration grew as he labored over the books. He should be riding to fetch the constable to have her arrested. Instead he found himself thinking, as Lewis must, of what could still be looted from the house to fulfill his desires. He supposed that once a man's world had narrowed to a dank cell his priorities changed. Suddenly wealth seemed of little matter compared to the sexual satisfaction he derived from touching his wife. Thrusting into her tight cunt was the most delicious sensation he'd ever experienced. Thief or not, there wasn't a chance in hell he was going to give her up so soon. The pleasure she gave him was too great. It seemed he had two habits to feed now.

He leaned back in his chair and jerked the bellpull. Impatient, he rang without pause until it brought her scurrying to the study.

"Your majesty rang?" she said with an adorable frown. She stole his breath with her brightness, her beauty. Her simple pale green dress clung to her curves so enticingly he wanted to take her right there on his father's desk. He had to remind himself that beneath the surface there was nothing sweet about her.

"Lord Blackwood, you look ashen. Perhaps you'd like me to open some windows and let some morning coolness in," she said, her tone gentling.

"Leave the windows alone." Because he hadn't indulged his habit, he was feeling miserable. His limbs felt weak, sweat trickled down his back and his head was starting to pound. He feared the chill air would only intensify the pain.

He tossed the book away. "I see you've been keeping the accounts." With an angry flourish of his hand he pointed out the empty walls of the room. "The question that remains is what the holy hell did you do with all the money?"

"The money?" she asked with an innocent blink of her eyes.

"The fortune you've stolen from me."

"I've stolen nothing," she insisted. Her thighs were now pressed lightly against the front of the desk. A pale gold tendril of hair had escaped the loose chignon. She brushed it off her face, a common enough gesture, yet completely provocative when she did it.

He tapped the ledgers. "Liar. The proof is all here." He was angry as hell at her and yet his hard cock throbbed with need. "And I intend on recouping my losses." He

motioned her closer with the crook of his finger. With cautious steps, she came around to his side of the desk. When she was close enough, he lifted her skirt and thin petticoat and slid his hands up the backs of her smooth thighs. She closed her eyes for a moment and swayed slightly as if she were dizzy. Then she looked down at him with huge, almond-shaped eyes that nearly melted him into a puddle in his father's chair.

"To start to repay me, little witch, why don't you do what you do best?" He moved his hands higher, cupping her naked bottom.

"And just what is it that I do best, my lord?" she asked breathlessly.

"You make me hard." He grabbed her hand and placed it on his bulging crotch.

She shoved herself away from him. "I have other talents, as well." She walked over to a cabinet beneath the window and unlocked it. Ryder adjusted the tight fit of his pantaloons as she bent over and reached into the cabinet. She slammed a pile of ledgers on the desk in front of him.

"What are these?"

"Those, Lord Blackwood, are the real books. I think you will find that you are still a very wealthy man."

Confused, he opened the first book and began adding up the columns. After a few minutes he looked up at her. "I don't understand. How is this possible?" he asked.

"Well, before I became just an inspiration for your cock, I made certain that your relatives did not deplete the entire estate. Armed with the marriage certificate, your uncle moved us into the manor and immediately dismissed the land steward. Henry soon grew bored of trying to make sense of the numbers. So given the opportunity I took over and created a set of fake books showing little or no money in the accounts. Then I kept the actual accounts hidden. It was very easy to fool them both."

Ryder relaxed back in the chair. She glared at him with her beautiful green eyes like a furious feline. He regretted his rude comments. But it was his way of defending himself against her overwhelming appeal. He skimmed over the books once more then returned his gaze to her face. "My God, woman, you are a genius."

She smiled now, and he caught a glimpse of a dimple creasing her smooth, creamy cheek.

"I daresay, saving the estate would certainly have paid off when you became my widow. You would have been entitled to a third interest in my lands."

Her adorable smile faded with his last mean-spirited comment.

“How dare you ascribe such treacherous motives to me! I was an innocent fifteen year old at the time the marriage was forced on me.”

“In prison I met boys of that tender age who would slit a person’s throat for pocket change.”

Her beautiful eyes ignited with anger again. “When I vacate Tesslyn Hall, whether it is to prison or the streets, I want nothing of yours.”

Though he felt perfectly entitled to complain about their union, he did not care a bit for her complete rejection of it. He reached for the next ledger, and his hand trembled from the lack of opium. It did not escape her notice. Now he wanted her to leave. “You might as well return to your garden. You’re of no use to me with your clothes on.”

“Bloody grand. I falsify the books so that the entire estate could not be gambled away, and now the whole thing will be wiped out by your despicable vice.”

With a flourish, he took a draft of the laudanum. “I will spend my money on whatever I like. I may even replace you with a whore more to my pleasing.” As soon as he said the words, he wished he could retrieve them. She looked startled, as if he’d slapped her.

“I am not a whore,” she said, her chin quivering, “but you, sir, are no better than the other two craven, selfish men that live in this house. And at least they don’t hide behind an opium bottle.”

He slammed his fist on the desk. She flinched. “They did not waste five years of their lives in the bowels of Hades.”

“You will get no sympathy from me. You now have every opportunity to regain the life you once had. And as for the new whore, I will make it easier for you to replace me. I will leave as soon as I secure lodging elsewhere.”

Her threat brought him to his feet. It mattered little that he’d provoked her response with his vicious language. “You, madam, are far from the mistress of your own destiny. And I do not give a good goddamn why you signed that marriage document. Forced or not, it is a finished deed.”

“By your own reckoning, I believe that I have twenty eight days left of service to you.” She curtsied deeply. “Somehow I will manage to last it out.”

Mesmerized by the slight sway of her hips, he watched as she glided from the room. Service to him, he thought with fury. Bloody fine, let her consider it a duty, but there would be no reprieve after a mere month.

Chapter Six

Jessie was nearly breathless with fury as she hurried over the lawn. He was a ruthless bastard, and she needed to get as far away from this place as she could. She had many domestic skills. Surely someone would take her in as a servant. Her father had educated her well; perhaps even a position as a governess might be possible. One thing was certain, she needed to find a way to dissolve the marriage.

“Jessie!” Lewis’s snide tone assaulted her from behind. “The man will come see the horse in a half hour. Have the beast ready to be shown.”

She did not bother to respond. She lifted her skirts and raced to the barn.

Jessie picked up the brush. She cursed Lord Blackwood with each exuberant stroke of the horse’s black coat. Unwanted memories from their night together filtered through her angry thoughts. Every place he had touched still tingled with pleasure. He was an expert with his fingers and mouth. She’d actually woken this morning with the mad thought that somehow the marriage could work, that she could make him happy. But obviously he hated her even more than his wretched cousin. Besides, she’d already concluded that the man did not have the capacity for happiness.

She grabbed Titus’s lead rope and walked toward his massive head. She stood on tiptoes and clasped his nose between her hands, planting a loud kiss on it. “Now you know what to do, my love, and make it good.” She gave him a hearty pat on the neck and led him outside having, as usual, to quicken her own pace to keep up with his long strides.

She tied the horse to the outside post and looked toward the house. No sign of Lewis yet—and then she faltered, nearly falling in front of her massive horse. Lord Blackwood stood on the small bluff overlooking the pasture. His shirt hung open revealing his muscular chest. His shoulders were massive. He swung an axe with amazing force as he chopped at a fallen tree. His strength demonstrated how much hard labor he must have

done. She was certain the scars that crisscrossed the skin of his chest were another Newgate souvenir.

She knew a little of his history, knew that he'd had a reputation as a rakehell. He'd probably never cleared a tree from his land before prison. He propped the axe on his shoulder and shielded his eyes as he looked in the direction of the barn. They stared at each other across the pasture for a long moment before she pretended to busy herself with Titus's mane.

Hearing the clatter of horses on the drive, she turned and watched the carriage approach. The instant the passenger, a short, rotund man, descended the carriage steps Lewis came scampering across the lawn to greet him. The prospective buyer had a malicious frown on his face. He appeared the incarnation of cruelty.

As they neared, Jessie untied her gelding and gave him a slight nod. Titus stepped forward with one feathered hoof then took a quick short step with the other. The horse's head jerked up and down with each movement. He repeated this hobbled gait for several more steps. The buyer and Lewis stopped abruptly a short distance away. The man's mouth tightened into a thin, vicious line. Lewis's pinched face grew red. He placed a placating hand on the man's arm. The man shrugged off Lewis's hand and screamed curses at him before pivoting on his heels and marching back to his conveyance.

Lewis stomped toward her. "You bitch! I will kill that worthless animal and sell him for—" His tirade was cut short by a large hand landing with a thud on his shoulder. With a start he turned around to face his cousin.

Lord Blackwood's expression was unforgiving. His icy stare could have frightened a dead man. With shock, Jessie realized she wasn't looking at an aristocrat, but at a hardened convict.

He shoved up his shirtsleeves in an ominous gesture. "Say that again and I will wrap that tongue of yours around your throat."

"Awfully protective. As if you care a damn about her." Lewis backed up a step. "She owes me. If she'd climbed into my bed as easily as she had yours, the debt would have been paid long ago." His voice rose to a nearly hysterical pitch.

"Haven't you any sense, Lewis?" Jessie shouted.

Lord Blackwood glanced at her and raised an annoyed brow before smashing his fist into Lewis's jaw. The crunch was sickening. Lewis dropped to his knees and moaned like a wounded animal.

Jessie cringed, but she was hardly feeling any compassion for the fool. After all, she'd tried to warn him. Lewis's wailing grew louder. Jessie hated to think what damage Lord Blackwood would have inflicted if he hadn't been mellowed by laudanum. Wanting to be out of earshot, she moved herself and her horse away from the confrontation.

Lord Blackwood yanked Lewis to his feet by the lapels of his coat. It was evident angry words were still being exchanged. No, not exchanged, she decided. It was Lord Blackwood doing all the talking. Eventually, Lewis, cradling his chin, slouched off like a scolded little boy. But the completely composed Lord Blackwood headed in her direction. It felt as if her heart were skipping beats. Damn him for always making her so nervous.

Without a word to her, he stopped in front of the horse and stroked its shoulder. He then proceeded to rub his hands up and down the horse's front legs. "So I was right about Lewis trying to coerce sexual favors. This I can almost forgive him. What man would have the willpower to deny himself such a temptation?" He straightened and patted Titus on the neck. "Interesting, even to keep your beloved horse you refused him."

"It must do wonders for your male conceit knowing you needed only a piece of paper to coerce me into your bed."

He had the nerve to grin. "Where is his bridle?" he asked while still looking the animal over.

"I beg your pardon, my lord?"

He glanced at her. His violet-tinged eyes raked up and down her body before settling on her face. "His bridle? What do you ride him in? I would like to try out the horse I bought and check out this curious limp he seems to have." He punctuated his words with a cocky, white smile so devastatingly charming, it robbed her of breath.

"You bought my horse?" she said, her voice rising in a squeak.

"No," he said calmly as he began walking to the barn. "I bought my cousin's horse."

She put her hands on her hips. "How dare you buy my—his horse."

He reappeared a short time later with a bridle hanging over his shoulder. "I suppose I'll hop on him without a saddle."

She could not suppress a mischievous grin. "You may certainly try, my lord, but I must warn you that Titus hates men. He'll throw you before you go three paces."

He looked down at the lush grass and shrugged. "The ground looks soft enough. I'll take my chances."

Jessie watched with awe as he bridled a surprisingly compliant Titus. He grabbed a handful of the long, wavy mane and vaulted effortlessly onto the horse's back. Certain that her horse would throw a tantrum with this male stranger sitting astride, Jessie quickly backed away. She had to admit, though, that the two made a magnificent pair. Lord Blackwood walked the horse a few steps then coaxed him easily into a trot. The feathers on Titus's legs vibrated with each high step. Lord Blackwood handled the animal expertly. His cue for Titus to canter was so subtle Jessie didn't even catch it. The man knew how to sit a horse like no one else she had ever seen. The wind whipped his glossy black hair as he maneuvered the massive Shire around the field in a consistent circle.

He reined Titus to a halt and dismounted. Both man and animal had worked up a sheen of sweat. Lord Blackwood's broad chest heaved with his breathing. He was so beautiful she could not look away.

"Well, he didn't throw you."

"Disappointed?"

"Perhaps a little," she said with a laugh. "You failed to mention that you were a skilled horseman."

"You never asked." He stroked his long fingers through the horse's mane. "He is a splendid animal. Strange, but that lameness seems to have gone away suddenly." He smiled down at her.

Jessie felt a telltale blush rise in her cheeks. "Yes, indeed, Titus is a very fast healer."

He laughed a deep heart-stirring laugh. He was irresistible when he was in a sullen mood, but in mirth he was truly glorious.

After handing her the reins, he strode over to the water pump and washed the sweat from his face. Lifting his head, he pushed the damp strands of black hair out of his eyes. With fascination, she watched the path of the water as it trickled down his throat to soak his shirt.

"I suppose you should cool your horse down before you turn him out to pasture."

She stared at him, convinced she had not heard him correctly. "My horse?" she finally asked.

"This horse could not belong to anyone except the woman he adores."

She resisted the urge to throw herself at him and pepper him with thank you kisses. She stiffened her spine. "I can't accept this gift. Besides, I will be leaving soon. I won't be able to take him with me."

The haunted, hard look returned to his eyes. “Obedient in bed, but as stubborn as sin in daylight.” He grabbed her and pulled her hard against him. “Must we go over this again,” he said in a tone edged with anger. “As your husband, I have the law on my side. I will tell you when you can go.” He bent his head and traced the rim of her ear with his tongue. She felt her nipples harden instantly.

Her breath quickened as he yanked up the hem of her dress along with the single lightweight petticoat, revealing the tops of her naked thighs. His other hand caressed her triangle of curls. “I do like the way you dress. Or should I say don’t dress. You’ve even left off your stays today.” He inched the hem higher until she was exposed from the waist down. It was a part of her body that had never before been bared to the sunlight. “No detestable drawers, for which I am damned grateful. Not even a chemise. All I need do is lift your skirt to enjoy your cunt.”

It had not slipped her notice that the man knew *far* too much about female undergarments. “I learned to dress this way in Africa. It was always dreadfully hot—there.” She could barely speak as his thumb stroked her cleft. His skin was still cold from the water and it heightened the sensation. “Light and practical...” Her words trailed off as her head lolled back. She had just witnessed how intimidating this man could be and now she was a rag doll in his arms.

He tugged on her earlobe with his teeth. “This is exactly how I want you. Biddable,” he whispered into her ear. His gaze drifted downward, his silken lashes shadowing his cheeks as he stared at her nakedness. He groaned as he slid his finger inside her.

She grabbed his shirt to steady herself. Instinctively, she started thrusting against his hand. Growing lightheaded, she gripped his shoulders. He inserted another finger as he kissed and licked her throat. A cry of pleasure escaped her lips as he placed his thumb over her nub and rubbed. Her body felt near to surrendering as his callused thumb drew delicious circles. He pushed his muscular thigh between her legs and pressed it tight against the swollen folds of her pussy, forcing his fingers deeper.

The pressure of his leg combined with the exquisite feel of his invading fingers created a sweet tension that quickly sent her over the edge. He slanted his mouth over hers, swallowing her cry of pleasure as her muscles spasmed around his hand. The moment she collapsed against his chest, he scooped her into his arms and carried her into the stables. She reached up and stroked the hollow in his throat. Even that little indentation enthralled her.

A smooth wooden saddle rack stood in the middle of the nearly empty tack room.

His eyes were opaque with desire as he threw off her clothing, nearly tearing it in the process. He lifted her by the waist and plunked her unceremoniously on the saddle rack. With hurried jerks, he opened his trousers and his tantalizing cock sprang from its confinement. He clamped his mouth over hers. His kisses were deep and rough, his tongue exploring her mouth with savage possession. He dragged his mouth away and whispered harshly in her ear, his heavy breathing sending a tingle down her spine. "Spread your legs, woman."

"Please fuck me." As she put her hands behind her to support herself, her breasts thrust forward. She parted her legs wide. His hands cupped her breasts, his thumbs kneading her hard nipples.

His eyes glinted with surprise at her shocking request. "I intend to do exactly that." He pressed her thighs open to accommodate the width of him. The tip of his cock teased her wet pussy.

"Wider," he insisted.

She opened more to him. Still unsatisfied, he took hold of her anklet and tugged at it as though it were a manacle that held her captive to his desires. She complied, spreading her legs so far that the muscles of her thighs vibrated. The cool air whispered over the moist heat of her pussy. He stroked and petted the pink folds until she was soaking wet. His fingers dug into her hips as he positioned his shaft and then shoved inside her.

It was an exquisite thrill to be impaled by him. Still aching with pleasure from her own climax, Jessie used her legs to clinch him tight inside her. Then he moved fast and hard, slamming against her and nearly bucking her off her perch. He withdrew as he climaxed, spending his hot seed on the straw strewn floor.

His abrupt conclusion made it painfully clear that the arrangement was temporary. For him there was nothing beyond the wild satisfaction of their joining.

Under his intense scrutiny, she felt suddenly shy. What a fool she was, leaving herself so vulnerable. And she knew without doubt that she would make the same mistake over and over again until he tossed her out.

He continued to stare at her as he lifted her off the wooden rack. She reached down and plucked up her dress. As she straightened, she found his gaze still locked on her. He reached over and brushed a loose strand of hair from her face. The gentleness of his touch coupled with the penetrating look caused a painful lump to form in her throat.

As unbelievable as mating was with this man, she yearned for the emotional thrill she imagined came with shared love. At this point the love was unbalanced indeed; she was falling hard and fast for her *husband*.



Ryder sat in his father's study—*his* study. He tapped the small brown bottle and watched the liquid wobble on the bottom. The euphoria he'd enjoyed only a few days ago had vanished. Now he was lucky if the opium stopped him from snarling all day. Without it he feared he would want to put his head through a wall. He hurled the bottle into the stone hearth and listened with some satisfaction as it splintered.

"Dammit," he said through gritted teeth and heaved himself out of the chair. Hunkering down on his haunches before the hearth, he scavenged in the soot for the moist ashes. He dabbed his fingers in the soot and licked them clean. He was groveling like a beast and it made him shudder with disgust.

Stupid damn habit, compliments of his uncle, cousin and a corrupt prison system. "Bloody rubbish," he said aloud. In truth, he really had only himself to blame for falling victim to its charm. He was easy prey to vices that intoxicated his senses it seemed. He'd been home a few days and he was already finding himself mentally and physically addicted to the exotic, golden-haired beauty living in his house. His wife. He found himself unable to clear his mind of her. Every inch of her made him lightheaded with desire. While fucking her, he could barely keep control of himself. It worried him. If he felt this way about her now, under the influence of a drug that deadened his senses, how would he react to her if he were clean of the stuff?

Ryder shook his head to remove the vision of Jessie naked and open-legged on the saddle rack.

He focused on the books in front of him and thought of her again. She'd rescued the estate from his relations' greedy hands. Of course, the house and grounds had fallen into disrepair in his absence, but it was nothing that could not be fixed. She definitely had talents beyond tending his cock. It was a shame he would not be able to keep her around. But he had been tricked into the union, and he would not dignify the whole scheme by allowing her to stay. Now all he needed to do was extinguish the blazing need she inspired.

Suddenly, the draw of opium seemed weak in comparison to his hunger for her body...for her.

The sound of Lewis's irritated voice filtered through the open door, shattering his soon-to-be erotic daydream.

"Get out of here, you filthy vagrant, before I beat your head in," Lewis snapped.

Ever charming, the son-of-a-bitch. Ryder pitied the poor soul who'd shown up at the door. He glimpsed Jessie striding toward the entrance hall.

"Lewis," she said, "I will handle this."

"Fine. Why don't you invite every criminal inside?"

"Perhaps I will," she answered sweetly.

Ryder got up from his desk and stepped out of the room. Cursing, Lewis pushed past him. Jessie was welcoming someone up the front steps.

"Come in. Let me get you something to drink," she offered.

"I thank you, miss. I've been on the road for days."

Ryder recognized the scratchy voice immediately. He threw wide the front door.

"William! I never thought I'd see you on the other side."

Barely a freckle was distinguishable beneath the grime coating William's face. "You left without saying your farewells, lad."

"Sorry for my rudeness, Will, but once they let me out of that cage, I never looked back."

William laughed, and it echoed in the cavernous entrance hall. "Aye, me, too." William glanced upward at the high ceiling. "You weren't spinnin' me a yarn then, lad. You really are a lord?"

"That I am, Will." Ryder held out his arms in a gesture that encompassed his dilapidated house. "Impressive, is it not?"

William surveyed the room. "It's a bleedin' palace."

"It's a wreck," Ryder insisted. "And I could use your help in setting it to order."

A dimple creased the man's smudged cheek. "At your service, my lord." William bent at the waist in a clownish bow.

Ryder gave his curly red head a smack. "Fawning from the man who had the Newgate guards cowed. Hardly believable."

William straightened with a laugh. “I only wish I could have hurried Vickers and his ilk along to their own private place in hell.”

“That was a wish of mine, as well. I don’t suppose you’re hungry?”

“I’m always hungry, lad.”

Not willing, he supposed, to stand too close to two alumni reliving their days in the gaol, Jessie had retreated and was standing behind him. He turned to her. “Jessie, if you don’t mind, we would like to dine early.”

She had a bemused expression on her face.

He took her wrist and brought her forward. “Let me introduce you to my wife.” Her arm twitched in his grip when he named her his spouse. It shocked him, as well, how easily he said the words.

“Wife? By Jove, aren’t you the secretive one! I didn’t know you were married.”

“Believe me, I was even more surprised about it than you.”

William shot him a confused look then wasted no time returning his gaze to Jessie. “She’s a goddess. You don’t suppose I’ll find out that I have a surprise wife, too, do you? If so, I want one just like this one.”

Jessie wriggled her wrist from his grasp. “Well, perhaps when Lord Blackwood is through with me—”

“Come in and have a seat, William,” Ryder interrupted, giving her a quelling look.



Jessie prepared a meal of oats and sausage for the men and packed her breads for Lucy. She was glad Lord Blackwood would be occupied so she could leave unnoticed. Having grown used to her independence, it was strange having this intimidating man suddenly deciding her life. She wrapped herself in her cape and hurried to the stables, determined to make it to the tavern and back before anyone noticed.

It was a short visit. Lucy was more listless than usual, offering an affectionate but wan smile when Jessie presented her with berries from her garden.

After taking a detour to visit her neighbor, Miss Whitcomb, Jessie returned to Tesslyn Hall. The afternoon sky was patterned with wispy clouds and the air had cooled by the time she stabled Titus. She froze as she heard someone enter the darkened barn.

“Where have you been, wife? Visiting *friends* again?” Ryder’s voice was quiet.

“Yes, as a matter of fact.”

As he approached, the sound of his heavy boots was muffled by the straw covering the ground. Weak sunlight shone through the hole in the roof, illuminating his face. There was a fiendish glint in his beautiful eyes. One side of his irresistible mouth was kicked up in a playful grin. He reached out and hooked his finger in her neckline, pulling it down low, nearly exposing her breasts. He leaned forward and traced her cleavage with his tongue then lifted his dark head. The heavy-lidded look he gave her was so sensual, she became wet with desire.

“I have plans for you tonight, woman. I intend to fuck you until the sun comes up, so get some rest.” He leaned forward and kissed her taut nipple through the sheer muslin of her dress before turning to leave.

Jessie shoved her hands into the pockets of her pelisse to prevent herself from clutching at his shirt. She was burning for him now. She wished he had taken her right then and there. Closing her eyes for a moment, she imagined him ripping her clothing into shreds, leaving her completely nude.

Lord Blackwood was wrong. She did not need rest. She needed routine, something that would put this marriage into perspective. A way to get her mind off of her husband. She would call on the Ducketts. The twins were always an amusing diversion. Balancing the sidesaddle on her hip, she strode toward the stall door. Titus would surely protest when he saw the saddle again, but it was too far to walk. Yes, a ride over familiar meadows might set her head on straight.

Unbidden, the notion of riding her husband quickly supplanted thoughts of riding to a genteel visit. She moaned softly as she imagined straddling him and settling herself onto his cock, of accommodating the length and girth of him, of bracing her hands on his chest and bucking as he filled her completely.

How could she sit down with prim Mrs. Duckett with these temptations simmering in her thoughts? Jessie plunked the saddle back on the rack and hurried out of the barn. She'd sit in the glade by the pond and try to cool off. Along the path she plucked wildflowers, hoping the simple task would empty her mind. She'd only gathered a handful when she began daydreaming about Lord Blackwood again. Her cheeks warmed as she recalled how he'd looked yesterday sprawled fast asleep in the parlor chair, the half-moons of his dark lashes against his cheeks. A boyish frown, which she attributed to opium induced nightmares, creased his brow. Daringly, she'd kissed the pulse beating in the base of his throat above his collar, and the corner of his mouth had quirked into a

slight smile. She knew she was making a mistake thinking of him as a brooding hero. The man was flesh and blood and had the capacity to cause her real hurt.

At the water, she tossed the clump of wildflowers and watched them drift on the glassy green surface. Suddenly the shock of the water seemed a remedy for her heated reveries. To spare her favorite muslin dress, she jumped in clad only in her chemise. Jessie sucked in a loud breath as she surfaced. She waded out immediately, and the breeze brought up gooseflesh. Her teeth clacked together as she wrung out her undergarments. She yanked the cashmere pelisse over her icy skin and found a spot of sun on the bank. The heat comforted her and she relaxed back on the soft ground and drifted off dreaming of his hands on her skin.

Chapter Seven

Hunger woke Jessie. Shivering, she opened her eyes to a moonless night. The men would be hungry, and she hadn't even started an evening meal. She shrugged out of her pelisse and struggled into her dress in the pitch-black. As she dressed, she tried to decide what she would wear when Lord Blackwood visited her bedchamber. She sighed. When it came to her new husband she was utterly hopeless.

In her disheveled state she decided to enter through the kitchen and take the servants' stairs. Male laughter vibrated through the kitchen as she opened the back door. Laughter, a sound she'd heard all too infrequently in this house. In her quest to avoid Lord Blackwood she managed to end up in the same room. She had two options: retreat out the door or walk right past him. The cold night did not make the first option inviting.

"Wish you could have seen Vickers's face when Baines caught him with his pants around his ankles ready to plant his puny prick right between Maggie's huge arse cheeks. There's no telling how long those two had been having their little *meetings*. Baines was steaming mad. Dismissed him on the spot," William said, nearly collapsing into guffaws.

Jessie had not meant to eavesdrop. She cleared her throat loudly, announcing her arrival. They didn't notice her.

"I'm still sorry I never killed the bastard. Had plenty of damn opportunities," Ryder said with hatred in his voice.

"Lad, the way I see it, you were lucky that Vickers didn't kill you. By God, some of those beatings you were on the receiving end of... You are one tough piece of nobility. Conveniently for me it didn't escape the notice of the other prisoners. They believed you invincible after seeing you walk away from pounding after pounding. Don't know if I would have survived without your protection."

Lord Blackwood's expression became somber.

"Sorry, lad, didn't mean to bring up those old ghosts."

Jessie cleared her throat again. “Will you two be much longer in destroying my kitchen?” she asked as she surveyed the piles of dirty pots and pans.

“What could we do? Ryder, excuse me, *Lord Blackwood*, was about to faint dead away from hunger,” William said as he laid a big hand on Lord Blackwood’s shoulder. “I thought by now you’d have put more meat on those massive bones of yours, lad. You’re not still clouding your mind with opium, are you?”

Lord Blackwood’s gaze dropped from his friend’s face. It was a silent admission that broke Jessie’s heart.

“What did you two connoisseurs make?” Jessie chimed in, desperate to change the painful subject.

William, however, did not take her cue to let it drop. He placed his hand on Lord Blackwood’s forearm. “You needn’t hide behind that poison anymore. Look around you, lad. Newgate is gone forever. You are home. A little work and this place will be back to its glory. Hell. That beautiful wife of yours should be enough of an incentive.”

Jessie flinched, wishing he’d left that little part off his speech. The poor, unsuspecting fellow had no idea he’d hit upon another sore spot. Curiously, Lord Blackwood hadn’t exposed her to his friend yet. William didn’t seem to have a clue that Lord Blackwood’s so-called wife was nothing but a scheming, money hungry cheat.

Lord Blackwood didn’t say a word but nodded silently to his friend. He turned to look at Jessie and raised an eyebrow. “Why are you wet?”

She tucked a damp curl behind her ear. “This was from the rain.”

“What part of the county were you in? There hasn’t been a dark cloud all day.”

Jessie tore off a piece from the bread loaf and dunked it in the stew in Lord Blackwood’s bowl. “If you must know, I went swimming.” She plopped the gravy soaked bread into her mouth.

“You swam alone?” Lord Blackwood asked.

“Alone, if you don’t count the small regiment passing by who joined me.” She helped herself to more bread and gravy. William was a far better cook than she.

Lord Blackwood gave her bottom a pinch. “Your jests are not to my liking.”

As she brazenly dipped another chunk of bread into his stew he seized her wrist and brought her fingers to his mouth and sucked the food from them.

“Change out of your wet things before you catch a fever, little witch,” he said.



Jessie brushed her hair one more time then set the brush atop the dressing table. She had donned her sheerest nightrail in hopes that Lord Blackwood would come. She could not believe how disappointed she felt. Apparently opium had held more of an attraction and he lay in a trance in his chambers. That thought made her more miserable. The moment she doused the candle, the door opened. The faint light coming from a hallway sconce revealed his impressive outline.

He had come after all. Her hands were shaking now. How ridiculous, she thought. And yet she was so relieved that he had come she nearly burst into tears. She'd promised herself not to get attached, and here she was practically swooning because he'd merely walked into the room. She stood completely still in the dark as he approached.

"My lord—"

He placed a silencing finger over her lips then walked behind her. She could feel the heat of his body as he pressed against her.

He wrapped a cloth of opaque silk around her eyes. "I am taking you to a secret place where I intend to have you until dawn." She leaned back against his hard body. "It is quite warm tonight so you will have no need of this." He unbuttoned her nightrail and slid it off her shoulders. It pooled around her bare feet.

She stood completely defenseless in front of her husband, a virtual stranger. With one movement he lifted her into his arms.

"But someone may see," she said nervously.

"Everyone is asleep. And what if they do? I am merely carrying my naked and blindfolded wife off into the night."

Jessie smiled. "Well, there is certainly nothing unseemly about that—so by all means, carry on." She motioned in the direction where she thought the stairs might be and snuggled her face into his chest. He smelled of sandalwood soap. His heavy boots resounded on the wood flooring of the dining hall. The back door creaked open. The night air made her shiver.

"Not nearly as warm as you promised." She nestled closer to his heat.

She was feeling very content in his arms when an insane thought popped into her mind. “You aren’t going to drop me in front of a large crowd of people you invited over to humiliate me?”

“Lady Blackwood, you are a very strange woman.”

They were quiet for a minute and then he started laughing.

She could feel the deep rumble of laughter in his chest. “And what exactly are you laughing at, Lord Blackwood?”

“I was only thinking how amusing that would be. I’d place you on your feet and pull off the blindfold. We could all yell ‘surprise!’”

“I’m so pleased that I planted that little scenario in your head. I won’t be able to trust you again.”

His chuckles tapered away. “You can trust me, Jessie, of that I can assure you.”

“But you don’t trust me. You think I helped trick you into this marriage.”

“Do be quiet, woman. I intend to ravish you mercilessly tonight, and you are ruining my mood.” He stumbled slightly but caught himself and readjusted her in his arms. “Somehow I pictured you being a bit lighter.”

“Oh, you! Well, bloody grand! Now you have ruined my mood.”

“You had a *mood*?” he asked.

She didn’t answer.

His rich, deep voice had a sensual tone now. “You were waiting for me, weren’t you?”

She blushed and hoped the dark hid her embarrassment. He kissed her softly on the mouth as he continued to carry her.

“We’ve arrived.”

She reached up to remove the blindfold, but he stopped her. “Not yet.”

Jessie could sense flickering light all around her and the sound and scent of running water. She surmised that they were near the small stream that traversed the west end of the property. He had carried her much farther than she’d realized and her without a stitch of clothing.

He lowered her legs and her feet landed on a cold, slippery piece of fabric. She’d expected grass.

“Lie down, my little witch.”

She discovered more of the same satiny fabric. Her shoulders and head landed on soft, satiny pillows.

Jessie could hear him moving around. She was tempted to lift the blindfold.

“If you remove that scarf, I shall use it to tie up your hands. Damn...”

“What’s the matter?” she asked, still wondering how he knew what she was contemplating.

“I was thinking about you with your hands tied, and suddenly the idea seems very intriguing.”

The next sound she heard was what she was quite sure was him removing his own clothing. There was another sound she could not distinguish, and then the sweet aroma of almond mingled with the scent of burning candles. Then his hands were on her. They were slick with warm oil. *Her story*. He was recreating the tale she’d concocted. She didn’t know whether to feel thrilled or embarrassed. He had rightly concluded that she had revealed one of her own fantasies. Suddenly, remembering the part of her story about being seduced by two men, she shot up abruptly into a seated position and grabbed for him. “Are we alone?” He caught her hands before she could yank off her blindfold.

“Yes, sorry to disappoint, but I don’t share.” He sounded more than a little annoyed.

“A very good thing, because I don’t want to be shared.”

He pressed her down onto her back and rubbed the soothing, sweet oil over her shoulders and down her arms. When he began swirling the oil over her breasts, she arched her taut nipples toward his hands. He tugged on them and rubbed them between his fingers. Then he worked the oil all the way down her stomach and over her hips. He leaned over to kiss her on the mouth. His tongue smoothed over her slightly parted lips. She stroked her fingers through his silky black hair and sucked on his delicious tongue.

He broke off the kiss. She could sense him looming over her again. He forced her legs apart. He trickled oil up the length of each leg, and then his big hands kneaded it into her skin. Desperate to see him, she pulled off the silk cloth.

He was on his knees by her side, like a dark angel worshipping her body. Flickering candles cast the whole scene in otherworldly shadows. In moments, he became aware that she was staring at him. He did not look pleased to find she’d disobeyed him.

“I do not recall ever mentioning a blindfold in my story,” she said in her defense. “Besides, I love looking at you.”

His lips quirked into an arrogant smile at her admission. "If you will not cooperate and insist on foiling this, then it seems only right that I get to act out *my* fantasy." He took up the blindfold. Using his teeth he rent the silk then tore the long cloth into two pieces. While she still lay upon the satin coverlet he dragged it toward a stand of trees. His erection bobbed enticingly above her. After making her sit up, he placed a couple of pillows beneath her back propping her against a tree.

He searched through his discarded clothing and returned with his cravat. He used it to lash her wrists together. Her pulse raced as he lifted one leg so that her knee hovered just above her breast. In this exposed and splayed condition, she watched as he fastened her ankle to a tree that stood some inches from the first one. He followed suit with her other leg, securing it to a third tree. Her bottom was angled skyward. She was completely at his mercy.

With a hungry gaze, he kneeled at her bottom and rubbed his oiled hands together. When his fingers touched her, they felt almost hot. He rubbed from the back of her thighs to her bottom until she was squirming. She wanted him to delve inside her. In response to her movements, he gave her open pussy a stinging little slap which only increased the craving.

Eager for relief, she moved her tied hands between her thighs and touched herself. He stopped what he was doing, mesmerized by the way she played with herself.

"Impatient wench," he said, his voice raw. He peeled her hands away and sucked the cream from her fingers. She held her breath as he lowered his head. His black hair felt like silk against her inner thighs. His tongue tasted all of her, from the cleft of her buttock to her golden curls. Over and over he rubbed his tongue along her most intimate parts until she trembled with desire. Then his tongue dove inside her. Rigid and long, it licked deep into her. He kissed her there as he had her mouth, plundering her with his tongue until her quim clenched deliciously against the assault.

He whipped off the restraining bonds and had her roll over on her stomach, rebinding her hands behind her back. He fit soft pillows beneath her, raising her bottom higher and higher until it jutted upward like an invitation to be fucked. He splayed her knees and the cool air against the wet heat of her quim made a sensuous shiver run through her body.



Ryder's hands shook as he picked up the almond oil bottle. He dribbled a small amount on the crack of her buttocks and watched its slow delicious descent over her exposed pussy. He didn't know how much longer he would be able to resist shoving his cock into her. But he wanted her as greedy and desperate for him as he was for her. He traced the rim of her anus with his finger. She jolted. It was time for her to realize that there were no restrictions, that every inch of her lovely body was his to exploit. He pushed his finger into the tight, puckered hole. She pressed her face into the satin coverlet, muffling a cry.

"Relax," he said, and with his other hand he rubbed her clitoris. He dragged out his finger and then inserted it again. He repeated the movement over and over, and soon she began arching her bottom up to meet his thrusting finger.

It made his heart thunder in his chest to realize she would not deny him anything. He settled himself between her legs, his hands spreading her buttocks, and pressed his cock to her pussy. She climaxed the instant he pushed inside of her. Gritting his teeth, he willed himself to be an automaton, to not think about the fact that she had the sweetest, tightest sheath he'd ever enjoyed. He would brand himself on her mind so that no man in her future would be able to completely erase the memory of him. Fighting release, he set a driving rhythm, plunging himself to the hilt with each thrust. He snaked his hand around the front of her. His fingers moved through the wet curls, sliding between her cleft to pinch and rub her firm little clitoris. She spasmed around him, climaxing over and over again. Her body shuddered with his deep, thorough assault on her pussy.

"Ryder," she said softly.

He was lost then, hearing her say his given name for the first time. He spilled gallons of himself all over the satin coverlet. After he took the binding from her wrists, she rolled off the pillows as though boneless. He worried suddenly that the only thing he'd impressed upon her mind was the idea that he was a ruthless beast. But her lips curled in a rapturous smile, and she reached up for him. He laid his heated, spent body on top of hers and pressed his lips to hers. She opened her mouth eagerly. She was heaven to kiss. Her small tongue tangled with his as her fingers stroked his hair.

She fell asleep nearly instantly when, with his hand cupping her bottom, he tucked her against his side. He stared up into the dark sky. Wisps of clouds veiled the moon. There would be no other man. That notion was impossible to swallow. Catholic or not, he would send her to a nunnery. His thoughts went farther afield. He envisioned a chastity belt. And then he imagined himself going mad trying to unlock it. Why punish himself?

He wasn't the guilty party. He did not need to part with her...yet. He'd set her up in London as his mistress. She nestled her face into him. No, London would be too far. He wanted her no farther away than his bedroom.

Chapter Eight

Jessie woke with a start. She glanced down at the muscular arms that held her fast. She couldn't remember returning to the house, and yet here she was in the viscount's bedroom. She lifted one heavy arm in preparation of wriggling out of his grasp. He shifted and his hands covered her breasts, kneading them as he pressed his erection against her bottom. And even though she was tender from the incredible things he'd done to her the night before, she eagerly opened to him. He rocked gently inside of her. It was a luxurious feeling to wake up to him in the morning.

Their coupling ended as it always did. Clearly, he had no intention of getting her with child. It was absurd to be sad about it, she told herself. All she needed was to be thrown out with a baby to care for.

He smoothed her hair back from her forehead, a gesture that brought tears to her eyes. "I've been giving it some thought, Jess. I think you should stay for a while."

Her heart nearly leapt from her chest.

"I could use your assistance in getting my estate back in order."

Elation turned to heartbreak. "The estate is your problem. I'm not interested in staying on one day longer than agreed."

"Stubborn chit. I never agreed to a definitive date."

She flung off the coverlet and padded barefoot across the room. Without asking she snatched up his dressing gown.

"Will you at least help me rid myself of my burden?" There was a hint of vulnerability in his normally confident voice.

She glanced at him warily. "You're ready to give up the opium?"

His hands were stacked behind his head on the pillow. He watched her from beneath hooded lids.

"If I don't, I fear I will lose everything, including my sanity."

The sleeves of his dressing gown hung far over her hands. She started to roll them up. “I have read about opium withdrawal. DeQuincey paints quite a harrowing portrait of it in his *Confessions of an Opium Eater*.” She chided herself for those realistic but discouraging words. She desperately wanted to see him give it up. “A man of your type can weather an experience like that better than most, I wager,” she added, wishing to sound more hopeful.

“And what type is that?”

“Determined, bull-headed, arro—”

He held up a hand to forestall any more assessments of his character. “Though you deem me a bastard, I am asking for your help.”

She swallowed hard. “Fine. I will stay.”

Suddenly she wanted to crawl back under the covers with him. She wanted to hold him and kiss the worry from his face. Despite his strong spirit, she knew the ordeal would be nightmarish. Not just for him but for her as well.



Titus shifted back and forth in his stall, swinging his heavy shanks, nearly trapping Jessie against the wall. He was making it impossible to muck. Jessie put down her pitchfork and pushed on the animal’s big hip so she could squeeze around him. His ears pricked up and his nostrils twitched with the anticipation of getting out for a romp in the fields. Since the viscount’s arrival home, Jessie had had little time for the gelding. Cooped up in the barn for three days had made the horse antsy.

“I’d best get you out today before you jump out of your skin,” she said.

Jessie threw a saddle on Titus and headed out. The air was crisp and the color of early spring was splashed across the meadow. Titus held his massive head up high as he trotted with an energetic stride onto the path. The cool breeze blew the hair from Jessie’s face and she laughed. The ride was exhilarating, save for the sweet ache she endured each time her sore bottom tapped the hard saddle.

Less than a fortnight ago, her husband had been a stranger whose image had been warped by the hate-filled descriptions of Henry and Lewis. Back then, the idea of being intimate with the man would have been a frightening prospect. But the man who stumbled into the manor that rainy day was far from the monster she’d expected. Though

he was a formidable specimen, he was a lover with an uncanny ability to touch her in all the right places. For a man who didn't wish to be married, he certainly wasn't doing anything to discourage his wife from craving his attention.

She tried unsuccessfully to shake her thoughts of him. But he'd already invaded her very core. Lord Blackwood had decided to extinguish his need for opium and she was pleased he'd asked for her assistance—and yet she was petrified. She knew horrific days lay ahead. She did not know if she had the stomach to witness his suffering. When her father was alive, the family had traveled through Asia and, though young, she had not been shielded from the bleak realities of life. Crowded cities were dotted with opium dens and many of the people she'd seen there seemed hopelessly bound to the substance. They were like ghosts, as soulless as the smoke that swirled in those parlors. Lord Blackwood was different, though. She sensed an unconquerable spirit. Or perhaps she hoped he was made of such strong stuff. He had survived a cruel and unjust incarceration—granted it was likely the opium that saw him through that nightmare. But now he had an estate to care for and a life to reclaim. Jessie suspected that once his mind was clear, he'd have little use for her. She would help him and probably end up hurting herself in the end.

True to character, Titus quickly faded and slowed to a plodding walk. “In the stall you acted as if you could run from one end of England to the other. Now it seems I may have to carry you back to your barn.” The horse swung his nose to the right, and his ear turned back with the sound of approaching hooves.

Two chestnut horses cantered up the path, and Jessie instantly recognized Joseph Duckett in his red military coat. The man next to him had to be his brother, Jeffrey. The Ducketts hadn't ridden over to Tesslyn Hall since the viscount's return. She could not fault them. She suspected most men would find the infamous lord of the manor threatening. Jessie was convinced that gossip about his arrival abounded but she was also certain that not a whisper of her marriage had filtered through the county. For her bitterly unsociable stepfather it would never have occurred to him to announce the union. It had been contracted for no other reason than to bleed the estate. And because Lucy's distrust of men ran deep, Jessie did not think she'd betray the secret to any of her clients.

As the twins approached, Jessie experienced a pang of guilt. She really ought to tell her two closest friends about her husband but it would only complicate matters. “Jessie, we thought that was you,” Joseph called to her with an exuberant wave. “Of course with that massive horse of yours, even blind ol' Jeffrey could spot you from the bottom of the

path.” Within moments they had ridden up beside her, one brother on each side. “I hope you don’t mind if we join you on your morning ride.”

Jessie turned to Joseph. “Not at all. And pray, how is your mother?” Jessie thought with fondness of their mother who had taken pity on her when her own mother had died and extended frequent invitations to tea.

“Mother is well and she was asking about you just this morning,” Joseph replied. He stroked his upper lip with his finger, drawing Jessie’s attention to the beginnings of a moustache.

Jessie had always considered Joseph to be the more sophisticated of the two, but now as she looked at his freshly washed pink face, he seemed incredibly young and innocent. Especially compared to the man with whom she’d been sleeping.

“Mother is planning a soiree this summer and you must attend.” Jeffrey blushed as he blurted out the invitation. Jessie always felt a twinge of sadness for Jeffrey. His weak eyesight had kept him from following his brother into the army.

“Some of my military friends will be in attendance, and I promised them I would fill the room with the prettiest girls I could find.” Joseph tried to be discreet as he nudged his horse closer and his boot brushed her calf. Months ago his flirtations would have amused her; now she found them annoying. She pushed Titus into a trot.

“Of course, I would love to come,” Jessie lied. To be away from Henry and enjoying a party would normally have thrilled her, even though her wardrobe was considerably lacking. Now, though, she was content spending the evening wrapped in Lord Blackwood’s arms. Jessie steered Titus down a small embankment to a sparkling creek. The horse snorted loudly, then lowered its head to drink. Her morning riding companions followed her.

“It has been a while since we’ve seen you, Jessie,” Joseph said. From the inquisitive look in his eyes, it was obvious he was itching to hear about Lord Blackwood’s return. “It has been heard around the village that Viscount Blackwood has come home.”

“Yes, he has.” Jessie was not going to divulge anything that would feed the monstrous rumor mill in the town.

“It must be terribly frightening living in the same house with a murderer,” Jeffrey said.

“Yes, is there not some safer place your stepfather could find for you to live?” Joseph asked.

Jessie suppressed a smile. What irony, she thought. Her stepfather was a far more sinister housemate than Lord Blackwood, and yet no one had worried about her growing up under the care of loathsome Henry Braddock. "If Lord Blackwood is a murderer then how is it he walks a free man?"

Joseph laughed derisively. "Apparently, justice takes its time. But as long as you are in no danger," he continued.

Only in losing her heart and soul to the man, she thought. "I need to return home. I've been away from Tesslyn Hall too long." Suddenly she had a pang of homesickness. She missed her husband.

Jeffrey was the first to turn his horse back up the path. He squinted as he looked back at his brother. "Joseph, we must follow her and see that she arrives home safely."

"Please don't trouble yourselves," Jessie insisted, "I have traveled this road alone many times."

Joseph pulled up beside her again. "Nonsense. My brother is right. We'll follow you back and then part from our delightful morning visit."

Jessie had an uneasy feeling about being escorted back. She was sure curiosity rather than chivalry was the motive that inspired the brothers to follow her. But as much as she was certain they wanted a glimpse of Lord Blackwood, she was equally convinced that the man would not want to see the brothers.



Ryder squinted as the harsh sunlight pierced the windowpane.

The chair creaked as he landed on it with a heavy thud.

William sat behind a mound of oatmeal and sausages. "You look like someone turned you inside out, my lord."

Ryder smiled at that assessment and then grimaced. Even the slightest movement of the muscles in his face gave him pain. At this moment he thought peeling off his own skin might just relieve some of the agitation. He spooned some sugar into his tea, then dropped the spoon on the table and picked up the entire sugar bowl, letting the sweet white crystals flow freely into his cup.

"Where's my wife?" How easily those words came out of his mouth. He was beginning to have trouble thinking of her in any other way.

“Saw the lass leave with her horse early this morning.” William stabbed a sausage with his fork and raised it up. “Have some breakfast, my lord. It will give you strength.”

The sight of the greasy meat made Ryder want to retch. “Believe me, nothing would stay down if I did eat.”

William shrugged and plowed the meat into his mouth.

“But, don’t let me stop you, William,” Ryder said. In Newgate, William was the one person on whom he could always count. The only man who wouldn’t smother you in your sleep for a pint of gin or a snuff of tobacco. His humor never failed. Even after Vickers had beaten him bloody just for the pleasure of it, William had molded his own nose back into something resembling a human feature and jested about how it could only add to his appeal with women.

“I’m going to spend some time patching those cracks in the roof,” William said. “Otherwise, once the winter storms come, the whole place will be leaking rain water.”

With care, as though his fragile head might rattle, Ryder nodded his agreement to that assessment. It felt as though his skull had a few fissures of its own. “I think heavy labor is what I need today, too. I’ve been meaning to take down the crumbling stone wall around the garden.” It was a mindless job but he hoped to work himself to exhaustion. Anything to take away the extreme restlessness that increased with each passing moment.

A wheelbarrow, a shovel and a sledgehammer were all Ryder needed to complete the task he’d assigned himself. Although his sweetly provocative wife keeping him company would have been a bonus. Apparently the horse still held more sway than her husband at the moment. For the hundredth time he looked toward the barn. Where the hell was she?

With all his strength, Ryder swung the heavy hammer toward the wall. It cracked loudly, sending a jolt of pain through his head. The taut muscles in his arms vibrated and strained against the impact. He traveled the length of the ancient wall, taking some small satisfaction from demolishing it. Sweat soaked his shirt as though he’d been swimming in a lake. He felt as though he was moving in slow motion and yet, before he’d realized how long he had worked, the wall was down and only a massive pile of broken stones remained.

For the third time William peeked over the edge of the roof to check on him. Ryder glared at him. “Why don’t you mind your own business, old man?”

“I was just making sure you weren’t taking that hammer to the walls of the house. I’m up ’ere on the roof after all.” William scooted back from the edge and out of view.

Ryder tossed stone after stone into the wheelbarrow. His mind was exhausted but his body, wracked with tremors, would not let him rest. He needed opium badly and did not know how long he could hold out. The only thing keeping him from running to his bottles was Jessie. The sensual night they'd spent together under the stars was the only flicker of light still playing in his black thoughts. He could not let her think he was too weak to get through this. And yet where was she? Maybe he was counting too much on her being there for him. The longer she was gone, the harder it was getting for him. The pain from head to toe made him feel as if all his nerves were exposed. What a fool he was, torturing himself like this because of some fanciful notion that the little chit cared an ounce for him.

Then he saw her. Her black horse lumbered into view. He gritted his teeth and cursed the slowness of the horse's gait. Ryder threw down the stone, very nearly hitting his own foot, and headed toward her. That's when he noticed two other riders. One of the men wore a red military jacket. His hands tightened into fists and the blood ran icy in his veins. His sweat-soaked skin chilled, causing a shiver to race through his body. Jessie turned her head and smiled at the man in the military regalia in a way that drove Ryder absolutely mad. Without another thought he strode toward the gatehouse where he'd stashed his opium to keep it out of his sight. Never had he experienced such an unbelievable sensation of jealousy. What had he done? How had he allowed himself to become completely smitten with this girl?



Lord Blackwood stormed up the path toward the stables. With unease, Jessie glanced at her two escorts. They had both grown considerably paler.

"Thank you for seeing me home. Please give my best to your mother." She needn't have been so obvious about trying to get rid of them. The two men looked more than eager to take their leave.

Joseph reined his horse around then stopped. His shoulders tensed, his chin turned and his eyes shifted in the direction of the house. But either manners or fear prevented him from turning his head to watch the viscount approach. "Do let us know if you need anything. Do not forget the shortcut through Mr. Glidden's pasture."

She attempted a reassuring smile. "I thank you for your offer."

As they cantered back toward the road, Jessie took a peek down the hill. Lord Blackwood, clearly in a thunderous mood, was no longer bearing down on the stables. Where the path forked, he'd turned in an ominous direction. He was heading straight to the gatehouse. Surely nothing good would come of that. With haste she removed Titus's tack and led him back into his stall. Once out of the barn, she lifted the hem of her riding skirt and raced down the path.

The heavy door of the gatehouse stuck, and she winced as she threw her weight against it. It budged open and, barely able to catch her breath, she pushed inside. Lord Blackwood was bent over plucking something from the pothook inside the unlit hearth. His white shirt clung to his back with sweat and dirt covered his breeches. As he straightened, Jessie spotted the small burlap bag in his hand.

"You don't need that!" Her voice echoed off the bare walls of the room.

He lifted his face and stared at her. The gray pallor of his skin made her gasp. His violet eyes squinted in pain as though he suffered the most profound misery. "Where the fuck were you, wife? Or perhaps the better question would be, who were you fucking, wife?"

His ugly accusation cried out for an equally nasty retort. How easily she could have wished him to hell. Her nostrils flared as she inhaled a steadying breath. She assured herself he was not in a rational state of mind. "My lord, do not invent ridiculous scenarios just so you have an excuse to fall back on your habit. Surely you know the Ducketts, your neighbors. I have been friends with them since I arrived here."

"Aren't you the social one," he drawled. "And do these neighbors know that you are married to me?"

"You may be reassured. They think I am Henry's stepdaughter and nothing more. It seemed wise to keep the marriage out of public knowledge."

"Admit it, you are too ashamed to own it." His trembling, blistered hand worked the knot of the drawstring. "Consequences to your reputation be damned. I would have you announce it to the whole bloody world. When you deceived me, you forfeited any right to disavow this marriage."

"But you may disavow it and void it any time you wish."

"Dammit, woman, that is my privilege." He loosened the pouch.

Desperate, she skirted the squat table, bruising her shin on the corner of it before hurling herself at him. As she had counted on, his reflexes were slow, and she managed

to grab hold of the bag. She jumped back, quaking with fear, and hid the bag behind her back.

His body shuddered with shallow breaths and he stared at her as if she'd just ripped the heart from his chest. A short laugh bordering on hysteria escaped the side of his mouth. "You are mad, woman. I could snatch that bag from your hands and have you naked and underneath me before you blinked those fine green eyes."

She maneuvered behind a chair. The bag was pressed firmly between her bottom and the cold stone. "I think you are a tad overconfident, Lord Blackwood. After all, I retrieved the bag from you before you were able to blink *your* fine eyes."

He took a heavy step forward. "You think I have fine eyes?" He shoved aside the chair.

Trying to make her movements imperceptible, she slid her hand into the sack and felt blindly. She closed a vial into her fist. "Well, I will admit they are rather bloodshot today," she said, "but, generally speaking, they are very fine eyes."

His mouth lowered to hers but he did not kiss her. "Stop playing games, Jessie, and give me the blasted bag." His expression hovered between pleading and agony.

Sandwiched between the wall and his muscular body, she threw the bag at him and squeezed out of the small space. He grabbed the sack midair and clutched it against his chest as if the contents were precious. And judging by his expression, they were. He reached inside and then froze. His gaze flew to her face.

Jessie unfurled her fingers and took the stopper from the bottle she held. She raised it to her lips. "For every drink you take, I shall take one," she said.

"Don't be absurd, woman." He put his palm out for the bottle.

"There is nothing absurd about it. You, a man who has everything, desires the contents of this little bottle above everything else. So I've decided that it must be well worth it."

He shrugged and plunged his hand in the sack and removed the remaining vial of laudanum.

Jessie's stomach clenched. How would she go through with this? She'd gambled on her belief that the intimacy they'd shared had forged a deeper connection. Yet here he was indifferent to her sampling a substance that had put him on a path to misery.

The cork popped easily out of the bottle and he raised it to his lips. She mirrored his movement. His gaze never left her face.

Jessie did not waver. The rim of the bottle tasted bitter as she pressed it against her mouth.

He dropped his hand and she experienced a moment of relief which lasted only as long as it took him to speak. "You are going about this all wrong." He pulled a thin metal cylinder from the pouch. "If you are to keep up with me, you must pace yourself. I am inured to the stuff. A swig is nothing for me. But it will knock you flat and then how will you match me dose for dose?" He moved near, took her wrist and lowered the bottle from her mouth. He dipped the cylinder into the vial she held. With his thumb placed over the open hole he lifted the thin tube from the liquid and gently tapped the excess off. "Hold your hand out. Palm side up."

The man was calling her bluff and she refused to back down. She did as he asked.

"That's a good girl." He proceeded to place a drop on the rounded pad of three of her fingers. "Ready, then? Shall we do this on the count of three?"

His dare pushed her to the edge. Without waiting for him to begin his mocking count she brought her pinky to her lips, careful to hold the other fingers steady so the drops would stay intact. Before she could taste it he seized her wrist and wiped the laudanum on his shirt. She let her hand rest against his shirt where the streaks of laudanum left off and felt the rapid beat of his heart.

"Jessie, my stubborn little witch," he said with a shake of his head. He corked the bottle and dropped it back into the sack.

"I'll take this away so you will not be tempted again," she said, plucking it from his grasp and striding with haste toward the door.

"Wait."

She stopped, worried that her small victory would be a fleeting one. If he'd changed his mind she was prepared to swing the bag against the stone wall. Cautiously, she glanced at him over her shoulder. "Yes, my lord?"

"You can't just leave me like this. I am a wreck. I need something."

Jessie's eyes brimmed with tears. Such a sight he was, his tall, elegant physique unnaturally hunched with pain. The sorrow in his face made him that much more appealing.

Jessie clutched the small sack tightly as she walked toward him. Up close, the torment was palpable. Sweat drenched every inch of him. His eyes narrowed as if even the weak light the narrow window provided hurt them. And he'd ravaged his fingers

somehow. They were raw and bleeding. She reached up and placed her palm on his cheek. His skin gave off a clammy heat. "We need to cool the fire."

The desperation in his expression threatened her resolve. In her hand she held the magic that would soothe his pain.

"My lord, if you are up to a walk across your grounds, I know of a refreshing spot to take a swim."

"The only way a swim will help is if you attach heavy rocks to my limbs so I can find a merciful death on the bottom." His gaze lowered to the bag in her hand and he stared at it longingly. The long black lashes contrasted starkly against the paleness of his skin.

Jessie shifted the sack behind her again, and he brought his focus back to her face. "Yes, I suppose suicide would be the easiest way out of this predicament. Particularly if you are a coward."

He flinched at her words. "Are you calling me a coward?"

"No, I said suicide would be the perfect solution for a coward. I would find it hard to believe that the man standing in front of me who has endured five torturous years in prison would surrender to a little pain."

He raked the hair from his face. "Poking your finger on the end of a letter opener is a little pain. I have had a leather strap flay the skin from my back and still it was nothing compared to what I am feeling right now."

The image of him being flogged made her heartsick. "If you want my help, I am happy to give it. But I cannot do it without you."

They stood in complete silence for a long moment. "Let's go swimming," he said quietly.

Chapter Nine

Before venturing out, Jessie ran to the main house to remove her riding clothes and put on a lightweight morning dress. She shoved the bag and its tempting contents behind her undergarments in the wardrobe drawer.

The path to the small lake on the south end of the estate snaked through an unruly mass of trees. It was a strange, out-of-place wilderness that seemed to have popped up unheeded while the rest of the grounds were trim and tame. The water, which was more an oversized pond than a lake, jutted from the back of the forested land clear of the screen of trees except for one spot which was shadowed by pines and seemed to absorb the cool green of their leaves. But for that shaded patch, rays of unimpeded sunlight kept the rather shallow pool warm enough for a swim even on an early spring day.

They had not uttered a word on the path. As they reached the gritty shore, Lord Blackwood stopped at the edge and let the clear water lap over the toes of his boots. He sat and looked up at Jessie. "You first."

"Me first?"

"I will undress, but after I watch you remove your clothing." His gaze was drawn to her breasts. "Surely, you don't intend on swimming in your garments."

Jessie surveyed the area around the lake. "We are rather exposed out here. I usually swim in my dress. If someone were to ride down the road there..."

"There was one reason and one reason only that I went along with this plan, Jessie. I wanted to see that beautiful arse of yours floating in the water. Now strip off all those unnecessary garments. But take your time. I want to savor the whole event."

Suddenly the idea of undressing for him out in the open with his eyes watching every move thrilled Jessie. She felt warm moisture between her thighs as she slipped off her shoes. Flirtatiously she lifted the hem of her dress, skimming it slowly up her calves.

“Stop,” he nearly shouted. “I thought I could do it but I simply can’t. If you were any other woman, ’twouldn’t matter. A wife should not look or act as you do.”

Insulted, she dropped the dress and the thin muslin slid back down past her ankles. “Well, you aren’t exactly how I pictured my husband,” she said, the hurt a solid lump in her throat.

He frowned. “I meant a wife should not be so sensual. I want you there where only I can see you.” He pointed to the secluded bend in the pond.

“As you wish.” Forgetting her slippers she circled the pond, doing damage to her stockings.

One of the trees in the grove was charred and split, as though cleaved by lightning. Half the dying tree sagged, creating a rough bench. Gingerly Jessie brushed off an insect then sat atop the fallen tree. With flirtatious deliberation, she smoothed the stockings down, baring her legs to the cool air. She draped the stockings over a branch. Lord Blackwood’s intense gaze followed her hands as she straightened and reached around to undo the buttons of her bodice, revealing the sheer chemise beneath. She slipped her thin muslin dress from her shoulders and dropped it around her bare feet. She hesitated in her undergarment. “I don’t mind getting this wet. It will dry quickly.”

“Wife, you are disobeying my order.” He pushed to his feet as if he would leave.

“Stay right there.” The straps of her chemise tickled as they slid down her bare arms. She stood completely naked in front of him. Her nipples tightened. “I’m going in. Hurry and undress.”

“I am not done looking at you.” His gaze never leaving her, he sat to remove his boots and breeches. He whipped off his white linen shirt and stood. The sun radiated off his pale skin and he resembled a master’s work, a statue so finely chiseled that Jessie sighed in awe. She could only imagine how extraordinary a physical specimen he would be if he didn’t have opium polluting his blood.

A tiny burst of wind floated over the water causing ripples and landing a large leaf on Jessie’s bare foot. She smiled and bent to pick it up. It was large enough to cover her triangle of hair. With a seductive flutter of her lashes, she placed the leaf at the apex of her thighs. “I’m beginning to feel like Eve.” She looked around her. “But without the apple. And without the snake.” Theatrically, she lifted a foot off the ground and checked under it then smiled up at him. “I hope. And you must be my Adam.”

He walked toward her and took the leaf from her hand, purposefully grazing her nether lips as he did. It was a possessive action, as if her body was his by rights. He lifted

the leaf to her breasts and ran it lightly over her erect nipples. "If I am Adam then I fear for the future of humankind."

Jessie's laugh floated away on a breeze. "I think humankind could do much worse." She took his hand and led him to the water. They both tested it with their toes. A shiver traveled up his body and down his arm into her hand. "It's colder than I remembered," she said. "Perhaps it will be a shock to your system."

He shook his head. "No, it is just what I needed." He dropped her hand and fell face first into the water. As he surfaced, he flung his thick black hair from his forehead and turned to look at her. "Christ, that was invigorating. I may sit here for the next several months." His body was completely submerged. The water gently lapped the tops of his shoulders.

Jessie congratulated herself for a splendid idea. The cool water was restorative; the grimace lines on his forehead had smoothed. She pushed off the shallow sand bar she'd been perched on and floated out to him.

As she came closer to him, she could see a faint glimmer in his violet eyes that she had not seen for several days. "You know, if you decide to stay out here, you will have to learn to snatch flies from the air with your tongue," she said.

Through the cloudy water his hands found her waist and yanked her body against his. His gaze softened as he stared down into her face. "I do have a very talented tongue." His mouth covered hers. Jessie pressed her naked skin against his. She could not seem to get close enough. His arms circled her and he held her so tightly she could barely breathe.

He lifted his head. "You realize you'll have to stay out here with me. They could just find us shriveled and naked one day still wrapped in each other's arms."

A little grim, but a romantic notion nonetheless, Jessie decided. She dove under the cool water. When her head popped back up she found he was watching her.

"Where did you learn to swim?"

"Witches float, didn't you know?" She smiled. "One of the places my father and I traveled to was New South Wales. He wrote papers on the native cultures. We set up camp on the beach. The climate was occasionally harsh and hot, so the turquoise waves were very inviting." Jessie put her head back and twirled. The white fluffs of clouds seemed to spin with her.

Lord Blackwood scooped water in his huge hands and let it cascade over his black head. "How did your mother end up married to my wretched uncle?"

“My mother detested traveling. What my father and I found intriguing, she found repulsive. Eventually, they separated and remained married only on paper. I spent my time between both. Two days after my thirteenth birthday, my mother received a letter from a man in New Guinea. My father had been stung by a poisonous fish and died from the venom. For me it was as if I’d stepped into an abyss, but for my mother it was like a door opening. She was free to marry again.”

A broken branch floated by and he grabbed it and flung it across the water. It landed silently on the shore. “But Henry?”

“She was determined to find someone who was the exact opposite of my idealistic father.”

“Well no one can accuse Henry of having ideals.”

Jessie nodded. “Or charm, or generosity, or scruples. I suppose the list is endless.” There was a quiet seriousness to his expression. “My lord, I had nothing to do with tricking you into marriage.”

“You don’t know how badly I want to believe you, Jessie.”

She sliced the smooth surface with her palm and sprayed his face with water. “Then at least try to believe me. You don’t honestly equate me with your monstrous relatives?”

“If you hated them so, why did you stay?” His frown lines were returning, and she wished she had not broached the subject at all.

“And, pray, where was I to go? I was but fifteen. Living under the same roof with them was a step above starvation in the streets.”

He tilted his head back slightly and narrowed his eyes. “Am I to understand that your mother blithely accepted Henry’s dictates?”

Somehow Jessie’s justifications only seemed to dig the hole deeper. “Sadly, so. My mother could be willfully blind to inconvenient truths.”

“Yet you worried over a headstone for her.”

“For all her faults, she was still my mother.”

He scrubbed his face hard with his hands and then looked at her. Agony crept back into his expression, but she could not tell if the cause was physical or mental. A combination of both, she surmised. “What the hell am I to think? You signed the damned document. Even at fifteen you must have known what you were doing.”

Tears glossed her eyes as she glared back at him. “Of course I knew what I was signing. I am not a dimwit. But my motive for putting the pen to paper was far different

than anything you might imagine.” She refused to detail the brutality she’d endured from his uncle. If he decided to trust her, it had to be on her own merits.

“Since I was forced on you, as you continue to assert, and far from the mate you’d hoped for, my curiosity compels me to ask that you describe this ideal husband for whom you would gladly exchange me.”

She’d hoped he’d forgotten her retaliatory outburst. He seemed rather more angry than curious. Holding her breath, she dropped until her feet touched the bottom of the pond. The water just cleared the top of her head. She bounced upward and began treading water again.

“Should I attribute your hesitation to caution? Do you worry that I know where this man lives?”

“It is not one of the Duckett twins.” She was thankful for the coolness of the water that kept a heated blush from staining her cheeks. “The man does not exist outside my imagination.”

He quirked a brow. “Then tell me of this fantasy mate.”

Too embarrassed to look at him, she let her gaze settle over his shoulder. “An adventurous scholar like my father. I imagined myself copying out his scribbled notes, organizing his papers and aiding in his research. And, of course, ministering to him when an exotic fever would overtake him.”

“He’d be penniless and struggling and worried to death he’d lose you. The poor bastard.”

“I protest most vehemently. I am a loyal creature.” She paddled around him. His hair, weighted down with water, adhered to his shoulders. Wrapping her hands around his neck, she pressed her face to its chill, inky blackness. After shifting his hair aside with her chin she pressed her lips to the tracery of scars on his upper back. His body seemed to vibrate with each tender kiss. He put her in mind of a beast that had never known kindness. Though she doubted it had always been so, wariness was his ruling trait.

Still clinging to his neck, she pressed her breasts against him and nibbled on his lobe. The opportunity to tell him how she felt would not present itself again. “I would simply reassure my distraught husband by telling him—” she leaned in close to breathe the sentiment into his ear, “—I love you and I shall always love you.” In fear that her voice had betrayed the truth of the words, she released him and dove under the water.

When she broke the water's surface, she found his gaze unsettling. His expressive, dark eyebrows lowered. "What the devil are you thinking? Taunting me with declarations of love you wish someday to say to another. Do you think I'm less than a man because I'm battling this bloody vice? Believe me, sweeting, I've still got both my balls."

What had she expected? Her impulsive avowal had only heightened his suspicion of her. It would take finesse and time to win him over. She envied the woman who would have both. Somehow, Jessie managed a carefree smile. "Of that, I am well aware and I believe they are made of steel. And to bolster your masculine pride even more I shall admit that you have completely spoiled me for such a docile mate."

His lids lowered, and the slits of his irises seemed to glint with skepticism. His scrutiny made her squirm. Evidently, his initial impression of her as a fortune huntress made everything she said or did suspect. Perhaps this was to be expected from a man so damaged by circumstances.

Finally, he closed his eyes and rested back in the water. "My head is killing me and the water is no longer helping."

His tall frame emerged from the pond with an obvious weariness that would not soon end. Jessie followed him to shore and wiggled into her chemise, her wet skin making it difficult to do it quickly or with grace.

The pats on the back Jessie had given herself earlier for suggesting the swim were soon regretted. With each passing minute, Lord Blackwood's shivering became more and more pronounced. "Can you stand, my lord?" she asked as she pulled the shirt over his wet head.

Slowly he rose to his feet and swayed for a second before finding his bearings. "And if I couldn't? Were you planning on carrying me back?"

She shrugged and smiled. Perhaps he was not as badly off as he appeared if he was still with humor. "It would be quite a sight, though. Me, carrying the swooning master of the manor across the lawn."

Suddenly he draped his heavy arm around her shoulder and she braced hers around his waist. "That would not do much for my lordly image, I suppose. A shoulder to lean on will have to suffice." He rubbed his chin over the top of her head. "Feel free to call me master anytime you wish," he said with a hoarse laugh.

With painstaking progress they made their way back to the house.



As had been the case for the last week, William was the only person who joined Jessie for afternoon tea. Without even a muttered farewell, Lewis had taken his leave on the day of William's arrival. Shoulders hunched in anger, he'd strode the path to the village toting a traveling valise that had appeared suspiciously heavy. And her stepfather had bolted himself in his room with his treasured books about the inquisition and witchcraft trials. She rarely saw him anymore. When she would leave a tray outside his door, he would not take it until she walked away.

Jessie noticed even William did not have much appetite for the scones she had brought out.

"It's going to be a tough road for the lad," William said as he dabbed the scone with clotted cream. "I've seen others go through it. 'Tain't pretty."

"Unfortunately, about all we can do is help him stay comfortable," she said.

"And make sure he doesn't throw himself out a window," William added grimly.

A loud crash from upstairs brought them both to their feet. They raced up the staircase. William pushed open the door to Ryder's room. The blue and white china teapot and cup she'd brought him lay shattered on the floor. The tea was now a spreading stain on the rug. Ryder sat up in bed, his back pressed against the ornate wooden headboard. Long sable lashes shadowed his pale cheeks. His black hair was matted with perspiration.

"The smell of it was making me sick," he groaned without opening his eyes.

"You should drink—"

"I don't want any fucking tea!"

Jessie silently set about picking up the broken shards of porcelain.

"Can we get you anything else, lad?" William asked.

"Yes," he moaned, "a bullet for my head." He lifted a shaky hand, pointed at his temple then dropped his hand in his lap.

They left him sitting there in the dark.

William shook his head as he shut the door. "If it gets much worse, I may have to tie him to the bed before he does himself some harm. Don't know if I have the strength, though. He's bound to be mighty powerful even in this condition. In Newgate he received a beating that would make any grown man fall to the ground whimpering like a babe. Not

Blackwood. He even managed to give the unsuspecting guard a few good licks before they knocked him out cold. I know I won't be able to control him by myself."

Jessie felt sick to her stomach. She didn't know if she had the courage to see him through this. When he'd yelled at her about the tea, she'd had to swallow back tears.

Soon Ryder was in the full throes of withdrawal. She could hear him pacing the floor most nights. And when he would give in to sleep, his moans could be heard throughout the upper chambers. He'd told William that when he closed his eyes he had vivid, grotesque dreams. The room had been cleared of anything which might have a deadly use. And yet he still managed to do damage. His knuckles were scabbed because he'd put his fist through the wall twice. He had not been able to keep down any food or drink. Jessie worried that he might succumb from lack of fluids.

As she did every morning, Jessie brought up a fresh ewer of water and splashed it into the basin. He sat at the edge of the bed, his fingers tensely gripping the coverlet. He was coiled tight, anxious to resume his pacing. She dipped the cloth and swiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Stop bloody nursing me," he said and sprang to his feet. He stalked across the room, his fingers continually raking through his hair.

What had she been thinking to agree to this? Her lack of experience was putting him at risk. One wrong step and it seemed he would shatter into a million pieces. "Let me hire someone from the village who is better able to deal with this."

"No!" His voice was raw. He returned to the bed and brought her hand, which still held the cloth, back to his face. "I'm an intolerable bastard, I know. But please don't leave me."

Though they were words she longed to hear, they seemed more a cry from his soul than his heart.

After she changed the sweat-soaked linen, she managed to get him into bed. His eyes remained open, staring at the ceiling. He repeatedly curled the fingers of his right hand into a fist then splayed them flat against the sheet. The heartbreaking thought that had plagued Jessie for the past few days haunted her. She was certain that once he was well, he would no longer need or want her. He would return to his life among the elite. Then he could court whichever woman he pleased and find a real wife. Despite his fall from grace, there was no shortage of women anticipating his return to society. Perfumed letters were already arriving with the post.

And soon the mansion would be restored to its original splendor. William and several other rather surly looking men had begun work on the façade.

Jessie could not bear the thought of leaving him. Her gaze glided over his face again, handsome even drawn and pale as it was. She cursed herself for falling in love with the man.

Chapter Ten

Besides taking care of Ryder's needs, feeding William and his hungry crew and giving Henry his trays, Jessie tried to keep up with the rest of the chores. But for all her efforts the garden was being overtaken by weeds and poor Titus was beginning to look like a neglected animal. And she worried about Lucy. She had not been able to pay a visit to the tavern since Ryder had begun his ordeal.

Jessie made up a meal of eggs, toast and beef tea and trudged up the stairs. She stifled a cry of surprise at finding Henry in the room. He hovered over Ryder, his malevolent shadow flickering on the wall behind him. Ryder was sitting up in bed staring into a wooden box he held on his lap. Neither of the men seemed to notice her presence.

Henry stroked one gnarled finger on something inside the box. "Your father was the very same sort. Indulged his vices. And they crushed him. Blue ruin was more potent than his love for your mother...for you. Guzzling gin by the quart and pouring himself into bed at night."

Ryder put his hand inside the box and pulled out the object of their fascination. The polished metal gleamed in the candlelight. He weighed the pistol in his shaking hand. His violet-tinged eyes had a haunted look as he examined it. He hadn't been able to sit still long enough for Jessie to cut his hair or give him a shave. With his gaunt face, snarled hair and thick beard, he looked dangerous. *No*, she quickly revised, *he looks like a man who could do danger to himself*.

She strode toward the bed, making her presence known. Henry stared at her as if she were an apparition.

Shifting the tray to one hand, she put her other hand out for the pistol. "Let me put that aside for a bit. I've brought you something to eat," she said, struggling to keep the panic from her voice.

Guilt mingled with defiance in the glare he aimed at her. "A splendid gift, is it not?" Ryder fondled the pearl handle.

Her heart in her throat, she flung the tray to the floor and lunged for the pistol. He quickly shifted it above his head. She fell forward, sprawling atop his chest. He placed a restraining arm around her so that she was held fast. As weakened as he was, she was still powerless against him.

She lifted her head. His crisp black beard brushed against her cheek. “He wants to see you do yourself harm.”

“And you?”

“I want you to give me the bloody gun.” She strained to reach the pistol.

“And what will you give me?” he growled softly in her ear.

“Anything.”

“Now *that* is a deal I can’t pass up.”

He placed the gun in her hand. She scrambled off his chest and locked it back in the box.

Ryder climbed out of bed and in seconds he had his uncle by the lapels. “There was no hunting accident. You gave that same gift to my father.”

“I helped him. He wanted out of his misery. He couldn’t give up the bottle.” He clawed at Ryder’s arm. “You should thank me. I saved the estate. I squelched all rumors of self-murder. The crown left your lands untouched.”

“No doubt you would have managed to keep my suicide a secret as well. To make certain that you inherited.”

Jessie pressed herself against Ryder’s naked back. His body trembled with rage. “Do you wish yourself back at Newgate?”

With a violent oath he dropped his hands from Henry’s coat.



That night she heard Ryder’s restless steps downstairs. With trepidation she went to investigate. After his uncle’s sinister visit, she and William had scoured the entire house clearing it of all obvious weaponry, but a man as clever as Ryder could be inventive. A succession of thumps brought her to the library door. She pushed open the door. Candles placed atop the reading tables produced a mellow glow in the spacious room. Books littered the floor.

A thin black cheroot was clamped in his teeth. A sardonic smile lifted the corner of his mouth. "I can't seem to find anything to entertain me." He gave her an accusatory look as he dropped another book to the ground.

How, she wondered, was she responsible for his agitated boredom? She strode over to the books and picked up a volume. "Let me read something to you." The gilt writing was faded, but she could make out the title: *Flora and Fauna of the Lake Regions*. "Perhaps not this one," she said and returned it to the tottering stack. She drew her finger down the spines, checking for a more intriguing title. He kicked the pile over and she jumped back. Her gaze traveled up the length of him.

He was thinner than he'd been weeks ago, but he was still shockingly handsome. The dark rings under his eyes actually added to the intensity of his violet stare. Though the room was cold, his linen shirt clung to his body with sweat.

"Believe me, woman, having you read was the last thing I wanted. Unless you could manage it naked and all fours. Perhaps if you'd stop nursing me for a moment you might recall your duty as my wife." He caught her staring at his erection pressing against his trousers. "It probably defies all known science. I should not be suffering this while shaking off this evil, and yet I am." *And it is all your fault*, his glare suggested. He took a long pull of his cheroot and exhaled a plume of smoke.

Something had definitely changed. For so long he had been in such a state of misery that the suffering seemed to be all his mind could cope with. Had he turned the bend? She prayed that he had. Even his harsh demeanor at the moment did not dampen the spark of hope.

"Must I beg, Jessie?" He was more intimidating than usual, with his strong jaw shadowed with dense black stubble and his mouth pulled into a sneer. His eyes expressed such desperate need it shook her.

Clearly, he was breaking free of the dark chains that had held him captive even outside of Newgate. He was taking control again, and she was relieved. Jessie was weary of always having to be the strong one, and how she had missed the intimacy.

The thought of him looking at her naked again made her breathless. Her rapid pulse echoed in her ears. She began removing the sash to her robe then parted the satin garment. Her bared nipples pebbled instantly in the chill air.

His jaw clenched and his whole body appeared tightly coiled as if ready to pounce. "I may be rough. I may be relentless. Are you still willing?"

Suddenly feeling a little less brave, she hesitated. A feral groan escaped him. With a deep breath, she let the robe slither off her shoulders and fall to the floor.

He threw the cheroot into the cold hearth and began removing his shirt as he strode across the room. He tossed away the shirt and stepped out of his trousers. She ran her hands over his hot, damp skin. He smelled of sweat, tobacco and the sandalwood soap he'd scrubbed with in the bath today.

"Always so compliant. Yet I know you wish me to hell." Clearly, he believed she gave in to his desires for some cunning reason. His callused fingers tugged at her nipples, pulling her so close that she trod on his big feet. "I am too desperate to question why you are always so willing." He licked a trail over her collarbone as he cupped her bottom with one hand and squeezed. His other hand slid between her thighs, his fingers brushing through her curls to stroke her already wet cleft. He groaned. "You are a sinful indulgence."

He plunged his finger with devastating deepness inside of her. She clutched his shoulders, lifted herself onto her toes and swept her tongue along his full bottom lip. His beard felt rough and foreign to her. With a low throaty growl, he wrapped his hands around her waist and plunked her atop the reading table. He positioned her so that her bottom was at the edge of the table.

The frigid air felt shocking against her hot, wet quim as she parted her legs. He braced his hands on the table on either side of her. They both watched as his rigid shaft entered her. "Do you enjoy being fucked?" he asked as he penetrated with exquisite slowness.

"By you," she said with a breathy whisper. She lifted her gaze to peer into his face. His heavy-lidded eyes regarded her with suspicion and desire.

"Clever wench, replying with the only acceptable answer," he drawled. He drove hard and thick into her core. He *was* relentless. He set up a fierce, driving rhythm.

He thrust so deep a soft, surprised mewl escaped her lips. With a predatory gleam in his eyes he scooped his big hands under her bottom. "Hold onto me," he ordered, his voice raw.

She circled her arms around his neck and wrapped her legs tight around his hips. Still buried inside her with his hands cradling her bottom, he carried her to the Persian rug. He pressed his heavy body atop her and his mouth clamped over hers, his tongue as demanding as his cock. She was lost in the heat of him. Feeling as if she were spinning

out of control, she dug her fingers into the muscles of his arms and held tight as he rocked her into a shivery, dazzling body-consuming climax.

The candles had burned down to stubs by the time Jessie pulled on her robe. She took careful steps toward the door. She felt tender, almost raw.

He watched her with a sated smile on his face. He looked like the big, bad wolf lounging on his side on the lush rug. "I warned you," he said.

God, but she loved him. He may have warned her about the sex, but he'd given no warning about how completely he would steal her heart.



"Woman!" He refused to use the bell she'd provided him. He preferred bellowing. She blew away the wisp of hair hanging in her eyes and, with the aid of the banister, pulled herself up the stairs.

The weeks of withdrawal had taken their toll. His belly was concave, his trousers hung low on his hips, but he had an adorable smile on his face. He looked down at his prominent rib cage then glanced back at her.

"I think I'm hungry," he said flashing her another heart-stealing smile.

"Finally." He'd been slowly returning to his daily activities, even spending an hour or two each morning balancing his ledgers. But all the time, his appetite had lagged. "There's some ham and kidney pie."

"Actually, I thought I might have a bath first." Sweat beaded on his upper lip though the room was frigid since he'd refused a fire. His overheated state was a lingering consequence of quitting opium. But his body's temperature would soon align itself with its environment, Jessie was certain. He stared at her face for a long moment. "You look weary, Jess. Perhaps William could fill the tub for me."

"William and his band of industrious friends are working hard on the manor."

"Is that what all that pounding was? I couldn't discern between it and the endless hammering in my head. I really thought I was going mad. Speaking of mad...has that vicious old bastard behaved himself?"

She shrugged. "After your confrontation, he's gone back to hiding in his room. I am sure he's busy plotting my demise. He would probably prefer something more torturous than burning me at the stake." Jessie put her hand over her mouth to cover a yawn. "I will

admit I haven't the strength to haul buckets to your dressing room, so I'll just fill a tub for you below stairs—"

"You are my wife not my nurse," he said, reducing the point he'd continually made once he'd turned the corner in his recovery to a succinct phrase. "I'll fetch the water myself."

"Some wives enjoy doing things for their husbands." She found it difficult to relinquish her role as his nurse. She clung to it knowing she was quickly becoming unnecessary in his world.

He nodded what was clearly a grudging assent. Ryder drew back the curtains and surveyed the work below. "It looks like I'll live."

She yawned again.

"No need to get so excited about it." His laughter had a deep, captivating sound.

She'd experienced a muted version of this charm before. But now, rid of the influence of opiates, this appealing side of his personality seemed to predominate. She wondered how many more facets there were to him. She would probably be long gone before she truly got to know the real man.

With another yawn, she left him and headed to the kitchen. She dragged the tub from a cabinet in the scullery room and set it before the stove.

Her arms were shaking by the time she emptied the last steaming pot of water into the tub. She heard the heavy footsteps behind her. The heat of his body enveloped her as she set the empty pot down. She rested her head against his naked chest. He turned her around to face him and tenderly rubbed his lips over hers. She put her hands on his face. He'd shaved, and his skin felt moist and smooth.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

"'Tis only a bath."

He tugged her closer. "I'm not talking about the bath, Jessie."

She buried her face against his chest. She wanted to crawl right inside his warmth. Tears rolled down her cheeks. It had been a very trying time, but they had both survived. Now all she had to do was survive losing him forever.

"Jessie, I've been thinking—"

"I'll fix you a grand supper after you bathe," she interrupted, dreading how his sentence would end. She pulled back from his hold and wiped the tears away with her apron skirt as she dashed from the room.



Ryder was drying off his legs when loud voices and footfalls sounded from the back entrance.

“Have a gander at that, men. ’Tain’t often that you get to set your eyes on a nobleman’s naked arse,” William said with a laugh.

Ryder stood upright a little too quickly and swayed for a moment before gaining his equilibrium. “I’m glad I could entertain you and your crew. How is the work coming?”

“She’ll be fit for a king by the time we’re through here.”

“I knew I could count on you, Will.”

“Now, we’ll just be helping ourselves to some of the goods in the buttery,” Will said over his shoulder as the four hungry men crowded into the larder. They emerged laden with bread and smoked meat.

Ryder grabbed a piece of bread to hold him over and climbed the stairs in search of Jessie. He found her asleep at her little writing desk, with her face resting atop the blotter, a quill still clutched in her hand. His heart tapped a strange beat. He’d grown more than fond of the little witch. After locking the door, he leaned over her and stroked his tongue over the curve of her ear. She sat up with a start.

Her feline-green eyes blinked at him with confusion. “Your supper! I’ll get right to it.”

“Later.” Food wasn’t going to satisfy his hunger right now.

There was a small ink smudge on her cheek. As he reached over to wipe it away, she quickly flipped over the letter she’d been writing.

“More secrets?”

“Routine correspondence. Very dull reading,” she explained unconvincingly. Her gaze dropped from his face to his erection, which tented the bath sheet. Her seated position put her eye level with it. She pushed the towel from his hips. Ryder realized she was trying to distract him from what she’d been writing, but he could no longer summon a logical thought when she placed her hand on his cock. She rubbed the length of him with her dainty hand. Then using both hands, she began pumping him.

“I want you naked,” he demanded. He was ready to rip the dress from her.

After removing her clothing, she sat back in the chair. He dug his fingers into her thick golden fairy-tale hair and shook out the pins. It fell like a silken shawl over her shoulders.

He did not have to ask. She knew what he wanted. With the tip of her tongue she traced the slit of his shaft, tasting him. He gathered up all her hair and wrapped it around his fist so he could watch her as she applied her sweet mouth to him. She dipped her head and tasted his balls. Then her tongue lapped the length of him. He thought he'd die of the pleasure when she began suckling him. She was a novice to be sure, for which he was grateful as hell, but she lavished attention on his cock like...like a woman in love.

That invented idea sent him over the edge. She would have none of it when he tried to tug her upwards. When she lifted her head, she traced her top lip with her tongue, seeming to relish every last drop of him.



After her very satisfying ruse to keep his curiosity at bay, she dragged him down to the kitchen. He gobbled the cold meat pie and watched her dreamy lids drift shut and then startle open again. She looked particularly adorable in her sleepy state. Absently, she got up to clear the table.

He took the plate from her hand. "Jessie, you need sleep."

She plodded to her room and in her daze didn't seem to mind that he followed. She slipped out of her clothes and crawled into bed.

Having shed his clothes, as well, he tugged back the coverlet, and instantly she curled into his side, draping one silken leg over the tops of his thighs. Her breath was warm against his skin as she snuggled into him. He'd survived his withdrawal from opium, but he could do nothing about his inextinguishable desire for her delicate body. The ordeal he'd gone through in the last weeks was going to pale in comparison to how painful it would be to send her away. But she was a liar, or worse, and he would be a damn fool to keep a woman like that close to him.

Ryder woke from a fitful sleep. Since weaning himself from the drug, dreams that floated pleasantly at first always plummeted to nightmare depths. He looked over to find Jessie clinging to the other side of the bed. He'd probably been thrashing around. The fading daylight cast the room in muted golden shades. He padded soundlessly across the room on bare feet.

With only a twinge of guilt, he turned over the missive she'd been writing. She'd detailed her accomplishments, her educational attainments. She was advertising for a position as a governess. Here he was torturing himself about sending her away, and she was anxious to leave him.

He swallowed hard on the bitter lump that formed in his throat. He crumpled the paper in his fist. He looked down at her. One petite foot jutted out from beneath the covers. He thought of the golden circlet around her ankle. And he realized that it had become a symbol in his mind for their marriage. A sort of wedding band. Though he hadn't placed it on her, he believed he was the first man to have seen it. It somehow made Jessie his. After yanking on his clothes, he shoved the wadded paper in his pocket. He doubted she would ever mention its disappearance. Still, he knew it was useless to destroy it. She would only write another.

Chapter Eleven

Ryder had the men stop working on the roof to ready the carriage house. Days later, before the final nail had been hammered into the structure, Jessie, kneeling in her garden, watched Lord Blackwood's sleek new coach arrive. It was pulled by a team of four matching black beauties. For Jessie, it was a vehicle of doom.

After the freshly-hired groom had been given instructions, Ryder walked up the path to the house. He gave her a hard look as he passed. She blinked back the tears and dug her spade into the soil with more fervor. It had been days since he'd come to her bed. Days since he'd spoken but a few terse words to her. Everything was happening exactly as she'd envisioned. Free of his opium vice, he no longer had use for her.

The house, as well as the stables, was quickly being staffed with servants. He never consulted her about the hiring. Suddenly, she felt an intruder in the home she'd been in charge of for five years.

And the post brought no relief from worry over her future. There had been no offers of employment. After her first draft of the advertisement for work had gone missing, she'd blamed him. But his dismissive attitude told her otherwise. The man had no interest in her whatsoever.

At the sound of another set of wheels on gravel, she glanced up from her work. The Ducketts' curricule hurtled down the drive. It occurred to her that this was the first time since the viscount's return that someone dared to pay a visit.

The moment the chaise came to a grinding, pebble-spewing stop, the twins leapt with athletic agility to the ground. Joseph and Jeffrey Duckett jostled each other for position as they hurried to greet her. Joseph, outfitted in his military uniform and sporting the newly grown moustache, gained ground and was the first to take her hand.

He handed her an envelope, his fingers brushing hers as he released it. "Mother has decided to honor my promotion at her summer party, and she insisted your family attend."

Jeffrey rolled his eyes as his brother twirled an end of his moustache.

“Is Viscount Blackwood included, as well?”

Jeffrey’s gaze slid toward the house. “Certainly. In fact, it would be catastrophic if he did not attend. The female guests are in ecstasy about meeting that rather beastly fellow.”

A queasy sensation settled in her stomach. Once he entered society again and mingled with the wealthy beauties, Jessie’s unhappy fate would be sealed. “I can’t say I blame them,” she said.

He chuckled as though he thought she jested.

“There’s never a surplus of rich handsome men,” she added.

“I saw him inspecting some horseflesh just this morning at Lodge’s farm. Looks the devil himself,” Joseph said.

She forced a smile. “Hardly the devil, Joseph.” When she spotted the object of their conversation strolling toward them, she felt guilty for gossiping.

Ryder was dressed only in his shirtsleeves and gripped a hammer in his big fist. Though he’d begun acquiring all the luxuries of a lord, he could not seem to settle into a life of leisure. He thrived on physical labor, a consequence, she assumed, of what he’d grown accustomed to in the House of Corrections.

Joseph tugged with some agitation at his moustache as he approached. “Mother will have our heads on a platter if we do not see to the rest of the invitations.”

Jeffrey was quite in agreement with his brother. He gave Joseph a shove to hurry him aboard the curricule.

“Your gallant admirers are spraying gravel the length of the drive in their hurry to depart, no doubt chipping the paint off my newly refinished stables.”

Jessie turned expecting to find one of Ryder’s deliciously wicked smiles, but he was far from amused. “The Ducketts are celebrating Joseph’s rise in the army,” she said.

He examined the address on the envelope she held. “They’ve made a mistake and listed you as Miss Nash.”

“They still think me unattached. And if you hadn’t opened your mouth to William, no one would know of this marriage but your uncle, cousin and the bailiff your uncle discharged. And your uncle only shared the news with Mr. Dresley to get his hands on your books.” She did not mention telling Lucy. There was no point in getting her involved.

Anger flared in his eyes. "You're ashamed to admit any connection to me."

"Who wouldn't be?" She bent over and tossed her gardening tools into her basket. "Darkly handsome, exciting, forthright, rich. Did I mention handsome? Truly attributes of which to despair of." She snatched up the basket and hurried away from him before he noticed that her heart was nearly leaping from her chest.



That night she lay alone in bed listening for his return. He'd taken the carriage out at noon. She drifted in and out of sleep until she heard the door latch click. There were no lit hallway sconces to light his way. His boot heels rang hollow on the wooden floor. She shut her eyes tight pretending to be asleep. A familiar fragrance drifted to her. Perfume with a heavy candy-like scent. Lucy's scent. Jessie felt as though someone had punched her in the stomach.

There was a thud as he walked into the furniture. "Dammit," he cursed. The bed linen rustled as she sat up. "Jessie," he said, sounding annoyed. "Come to my room. You know this bed is too bloody short for me." With Lucy's fragrance lingering in her nostrils, she was unable to work up any sympathy for the fact that his feet hung off the end of the bed when he stretched out completely.

"I'm too tired tonight, Lord Blackwood." She winced at the petulant tone in her voice.

"Lord?" He bumped into something else, and a glass item crashed to the ground. Whatever it had been crunched under his heavy boot heels. "Light a lamp, would you, before I kill myself."

"I'd rather you just leave."

"Why?" His tone was becoming angrier.

"Because, sir, you are an adulterer." It was absurd to accuse a man who had been tricked into marriage of infidelity, but she really did not give a damn. "I can smell Lucy on you." Tears were starting to spill from her eyes.

"You failed to mention that you'd shared the news of our union with her."

She heard him struggle with more obstacles in his path, and then he yanked open the curtains with force. The room was silvered in moonlight.

"Deceitful bastard."

He had yet to remove his greatcoat or gloves. He hovered over her, a dark menacing figure. "You are the disloyal creature. Was it not you who paid visits to the tavern after my incarceration? Providing charity and solace. Atoning for the sin of your husband. A sin I hadn't even committed. Did you once write to me to ascertain the truth?"

"I had only your uncle's and cousin's characters to judge you by. It did not seem improbable that a relative of theirs could do murder. I have not thought of my visits as a way to assuage guilt for a long while. Lucy is, or rather *was*, a friend."

"She is still a friend." He began removing his gloves as he neared.

"Well then, I should warn her that you are insatiable in bed. Or perhaps she already knows." She brought the covers up to her throat and scrunched down in the bed. She did not want his cheating hands to touch her. She jerked away when he reached out for her. "I suppose she deserves your gratitude. Without her help you would not have been liberated from Newgate."

He chuckled. "And you think bedding her would be a just reward for rescuing me from that place?"

"Well, you are an amazingly talented man."

His sensual laugh sent a tingle through her body.

"I haven't had Lucy." He pocketed his gloves, shrugged out of his greatcoat and tossed it over a chair. "Truth is, she wouldn't accept any help from me. Said she had done it all for you. I believe she wants you in the same hungry way that I do."

"Whatever does that mean?"

She could see his shoulders heave in a sigh. "I don't want to talk about Lucy anymore. I want to fuck."

"I'm completely charmed."

He flung himself on the bed, boots and all. He lay on his side facing her. She scooted away, so close to the edge she was in danger of falling off. He tore the sheet from her grasp and tugged down her scooped neckline, exposing a breast. He filled his treacherous hand with her breast. The familiar electric sensation coursed through her body. He weighed her breast in his hand. "A perfect fit. I often think you were made for me. If only you weren't so damn stubborn. Night after night I have waited for you to come to me. You force me to take matters into my own hands." His thumb drew a delicious circle around her nipple.

He leaned toward her and licked the tears from her cheeks. She pressed on his hard chest and shoved. It was just a matter of time, if not Lucy then surely another woman would take her place. "You cannot have me whenever you please."

With her palms still pressed against his chest, she could feel his body tense.

"Is that right?" he asked in a surly tone.

"Exactly right."

He was off the bed in an instant. With an impact that made the bedstead reverberate, he slammed the adjoining bedroom door behind him.



In the morning, Jessie woke to the rich scent of tobacco. She turned over to find Ryder sitting in the chair beside her bed. She pushed the hair from her eyes as she sat up. He stared at her through a screen of smoke. She wondered if he'd been there all night until she noticed that his hair was damp from being washed. He tapped the cheroot's ashes onto a tea saucer that sat on the night table by his elbow. "I require your assistance today. Don't worry. It is for nothing so abhorrent as sleeping with me." He gave her a nasty smile. "I want you to arrange a menu for this evening. Something that will bring my uncle to the table. Then I would like you to search your wardrobe for a dress suitable for Lucy to wear."

"I knew it. You are a cheat and a liar."

"Think what you will," he said with a shrug. "Just do as I ask. We are entertaining tonight." He got to his feet. At the doorway he paused with his hand on the latch, the smoking cheroot clamped between his long fingers. "Oh, and you will accompany me to the tavern. I would not wish to scare her off."

She hurled her pillow, just missing his retreating back. The bastard was making her go and fetch her replacement.



The morning's post finally brought a response to her advertisement for employment. It was a letter written in a man's bold, sprawling hand. Mr. Coates, a widower living in Brighton with three young children, sounded quite desperate for a woman's help.

Taking on the duties of a mistress of the house instead of a servant, Jessie arranged for the evening's meal and had the two new maids clean the chandeliers and polish the wood in the dining hall until it gleamed.

Bursting with nervous energy, she supervised the rearranging of furniture in the parlor. She had the men drag out the threadbare rug and replace the sofa with a better one from the upstairs parlor. When she asked William to move the heavy wingback chair for the third time, he gave her a forbearing smile.

With the back of his sleeve, he swiped the sweat from his forehead and said, "You look as anxious as a cat on a bed of needles. Try this." He dug into his pocket and extracted a dented metal flask. He offered it to her as though he were presenting her with a miracle. "An old family recipe. Relieves all that ails you."

She waved it away. Liquid sloshed inside as he thrust it at her again. "Keep it. You may change your mind."

Chapter Twelve

Jessie fussed with her apparel. What, she wondered, did one wear on first being delivered into the hands of a flesh peddler? She decided on a very low-cut, nearly sheer muslin dress with only the flimsiest of petticoats and stays that pushed and separated her breasts so that they were pertly displayed. She did not wear a chemise, and the top arcs of her nipples were quite visible through the fabric.

She picked up the letter from Brighton and tucked it into her reticule. While in town, she would find a way to post her reply. Retscliff's establishment would not hold her. She'd die getting out of there if she had to.

With only the lightest of lace shawls, Jessie stepped onto the porch. The four black beasts seemed to shiver with impatience in their harnesses while their master paced the drive. Jessie took a steadying breath and prepared to discover her fate.

Ryder turned and watched her approach, quirking a brow in response to her attire. The noon sun glinted off his gleaming black hair. His appetite had returned completely. He was putting weight back on. He looked utterly edible in his bottle-green jacket, buff-colored, muscle-hugging pantaloons and polished Hessians. Brushing away the hand he offered, Jessie stepped up into the elegant new coach.

She sat stiffly, unable to relax against the plush seats.

He brushed by her as he climbed aboard, and her eyes drifted shut with pleasure as she inhaled sandalwood and his own delicious scent.

Once he was seated, she tossed him the sack of clothes. "For your new lover."

He did not make an attempt to catch the bag. It bounced off his shoulder, landing on the carriage floor. He pushed it aside with his foot. With his fist he rapped the roof of the coach, signaling the driver. The carriage rumbled down the drive.

"Will you be leaving me there at the tavern? Is this an even exchange?"

He insinuated the toe of his Hessians between her kidskin slippers. "An even exchange? Hardly. With the way you fuck and suck you could make the man's fortune."

Fighting the need to slap him, she clutched her gloved hands into tight fists.

He actually had the audacity to smile. "It was meant as a compliment."

"I believe, Lord Blackwood, that prison life has turned you into a beast."

"No doubt."

"You will not be pleased until you see me punished."

He sat forward, his arms resting on his spread thighs. "Yes, that would please me," he drawled suggestively.

"And whoring for Retscliff is the penalty you've devised." Her chin started to quiver. She sank her teeth into her bottom lip to stop from crying.

"Honestly, woman, you must think me an absolute bastard."

She did not gainsay him.

"I am most assuredly *not* leaving you with Retscliff. The thought repulses me. You will simply have to trust me on this."

"I'm to trust you? Yet you do not give me the same consideration. You do not have faith enough in me to even tell me what you are planning for tonight."

"True," he said matter-of-factly. "I'm still not certain with whom you are in league."

With angry movements, she plucked off her gloves. Intent on ignoring him, she picked up her reticule and removed her small needlework frame. She stabbed the needle through the cloth, wildly missing her mark, a delicately embroidered sprig of lavender. This was certainly not calming her. The needlework frame clinked against something metal as she shoved it back into her reticule. She remembered William's miracle flask. After uncapping the slim bottle, she took a healthy swallow. The liquid felt warm and soothing.

"What have you there?"

"Some sort of elixir William gave me. An old family recipe. He thought it would help calm my nerves." She took several more drinks. "It has a bite, but I rather like it." She had no intention of offering him any.

Jessie relaxed back against the soft cushions. After taking another couple of far-from-dainty sips, she suddenly began focusing on pieces of the man instead of the whole. The line of his straight nose fascinated her.

“With all the damage they did to you in prison, ’tis a wonder your nose was never broken. ’Tis quite the most handsome I’ve seen.” That revelation deserved another long drink she decided.

“Yes, I give thanks every day that it was spared,” he drawled.

She closed her eyes and relished the sensation of William’s marvelous elixir. When she opened her eyes she found another part of his anatomy equally mesmerizing. “William did excellent work trimming your hair,” she commented. The haircut had exposed the lobes of his ears. They were exactly as a man’s ear lobes ought be, she decided. Her attention drifted to his Adam’s apple. She hoped he’d swallow so she could watch it bob.

He reached over and snatched the bottle from her just as she was bringing it back to her lips. He took a whiff of the flask’s contents and then recapped it. “That is nearly straight whiskey.” He shoved the bottle into his coat pocket.

“Is it? I’ve never tried it before,” she said indifferently. She ran the palms of her hands over the velvet seat.

“And you are getting quite foxed.”

Her gaze drifted to him. Her lids felt heavy. “I’m merely relaxed. Perhaps you should have some. You seem quite tense yourself.”

“What I am is frustrated.”

“And how are you frustrated, my lord?”

“You’ve spoiled me. I hate hearing the word ‘no’ from your lips.”

He was still brooding about her refusal to bed him. “And I hate saying no to you,” she muttered. She blamed the liquor for loosening her tongue.

“What did you say?”

Jessie felt as though her whole body was blushing. She peered into his beautiful violet-tinged eyes. They were inspecting her closely. She swallowed hard. “I hate saying no to you,” she repeated. She’d spent most the night wishing she hadn’t rejected him, wanting to crawl into his bed with him.

His eyebrows rose in surprise at her revelation. “Yet you did.”

“I was angry,” she said with a languid shrug. “If you ever find yourself truly married, I believe you can expect your wife to say no once in a while.”

“One wife at a time is enough to worry about.”

With the alcohol heating her blood, all inhibitions slid away. Again she let her eyes take their fill of him only this time she took in the entire glorious male. He was impossible to resist.

She kicked off her slippers. Her skin tingled with anticipation as she smoothed the silk stockings down her legs. His black lashes lowered as he followed the progress of her fingers. She tossed the delicate stockings aside, set her foot on his leg and kneaded his hard-muscle thigh with the sole of her foot. He hooked his finger in the gold anklet and brought her foot to rest atop his erection. She smoothed her toes over his impressive length.

Remembering the reaction she'd gotten the last time she'd touched herself in his presence, she gathered up her skirts until they were bunched around her waist. She continued to massage his cock with her foot as her fingers found her triangle of hair. Letting her unoccupied leg fall wide, she gave him an unobstructed view of her pussy.

His intense gaze was riveted on what she was doing to herself. He looked as if he might devour her. She stroked the wet pink folds. "To use your words, I think I shall greatly miss fucking and sucking you when I am gone," she said. She could not believe how those vulgar words tripped so easily off her tongue.

A completely untrustworthy smile suddenly curled his lips. "Tease," he said, and with the strength and skill of an expert lover, he soon had her in the position he wanted. She found herself slung over his lap, her head hanging down. The weight of her hair threatened to undo her chignon. The skirts were still bunched at her waist, presenting her naked bottom to him. She tried to wriggle out of his grasp, and he brought his hand down hard on her bottom. She brought her bottom up asking for another spank. He readily complied. The next smack made her pussy tingle. He parted her legs and dragged his fingers up her cleft. The sensation nearly launched her off his lap. He inserted two fingers into her dripping wet pussy.

"Deeper," she whispered.

"Jessie," he said with a groan and obliged. As he thrust them in and out of her tight sheath, she lifted her bottom higher to absorb the full impact of the driving rhythm.

After thoroughly exploring her with his fingers, he maneuvered her again with complete mastery. She now straddled his thighs. He unbuttoned the bodice of her dress, exposing the tops of her breasts. He gripped her around her ribcage, pushing her breasts up so they nearly spilled over the stays. His tongue laved her, wetting the nipples he'd exposed. Jessie plowed her fingers through his silken hair. The whiskey made her brave.

When he lifted his head, she took his head in her hands and slanted her mouth over his, kissing him like a woman in love, putting her whole heart and soul into it.

She lifted her head. Even in her liquor-fogged state she noticed the look of surprise in his eyes.

Jessie did not give him much time to think about her kiss. Eagerly, she unfastened the panel of his pantaloons and released him. With haste, she lifted herself onto his thick shaft. She was greedy for him. “Oh,” she said as she lowered herself onto him. Her eyes tilted back in her head. He felt enormous inside her. In that respect, he truly was a beast and he was completely, jarringly inside of her. And she luxuriated in every inch of his cock as she rode him. The carriage jostled over a particularly deep rut. His cock plumbed new depths.

“Your punishments are devastating,” she said with a scintillating shiver.

She felt his shoulders tense beneath her grip as he reached climax. He plunked her unceremoniously on the seat beside him, spending his seed outside her body.

Nothing had changed between them. Not even the liquor could soften the pain. She felt suddenly sick.

She waited only until they were both decently attired again and then lifted the window shade and forced open the window.

“Please stop this thing. Stop this bloody coach!” she shouted.

Jessie tripped down the steps before the carriage had even come to a complete standstill and fell to her knees. She scrambled to her feet. “Do not bloody follow me,” she told him as she exited the coach. The thin soles of her slippers offered little protection as she ran through the underbrush. She took refuge behind some shrubs and emptied her stomach.

She rose on unsteady limbs, brushed the grass from her skirts and pulled the pins from her hair. Let her husband wait. She still bristled with fury at his dismissive behavior, of being tossed aside so that he would not impregnate her. She took her time refashioning a bun. If her husband was to be believed, her notions about being delivered into Retscliff’s hands were absurd. But she had to bring this sweet torture to an end. She could not live a life in limbo. A life that caromed between heaven and hell. Once in town it was imperative that she post a letter to her prospective employer.

His arms crossed over his chest, he pretended a negligent stance, leaning back against the coach, but tension was present in every line of his body. She avoided looking up at him as she passed.

When she resumed her seat, she felt shaken, hollowed out. Had she ever felt such a heart-wrenching sadness before?

He climbed in and resumed the seat across from her. "I will wring William's neck."

"It isn't his fault. None of this is his fault." She peered out the window. "Do you know what Brighton is like? Have you ever been there?" she asked.

"Once. But why?"

She glanced at him. His eyes were narrowed in suspicion.

"Curious, that's all. Would lavender grow there, do you think?"

A muscle in his jaw jumped. "I know nothing of plants. If the garden at home isn't big enough for you I'll have William dig up a portion of the lawn. Hell, you can turn the whole lawn into a garden if you'd like."

It was as if her lips and heart were in agreement and she could manage only a sorrowful smile. "I've decided I'd very much like to have Titus."

"As I said. The horse is yours."

"Could one reach Brighton on horseback?" she asked.

"Why would *one* be asking such a question?"

Rather than look at him, she began tugging on her gloves. "I was feeling nostalgic for the ocean."

"We have a perfectly good carriage to use when *we* travel."

His emphasis on the word "we" was inescapably pointed. Jessie thought it best to let the subject drop.

When they pulled into the small village, Ryder took a box from a compartment beneath the seat. He removed a pistol not dissimilar to the one his uncle had presented him. "Merely a precaution, on the chance that Retscliff can't be bought," he said as he tucked the gun into his waistband.

"I believe he is never without a weapon." Without thinking, she rubbed the arm Retscliff had wounded. His gaze flicked to her arm.

"Did that whoreson shoot at you?" he asked through clenched teeth.

"I was wearing my cloak. He probably thought I was a thief."

Rage flashed in his eyes.

In desperation, she gripped his lapels. "Promise me you will do nothing to send yourself back to Newgate."

His nostrils flared. Danger radiated off of him.

She became more frantic. "It was a mere scratch. Besides it isn't as if I'm your real wife. We were both forced into this marriage. We owe each other nothing."

He pried her hands from his coat. "Thank you for reminding me of those facts."

The driver parked the vehicle in front of the abandoned tannery and Ryder climbed out.

She attempted to follow him.

"Where the devil do you think you're going?" he asked.

"Not with you, I suppose." She sat back down.

"Do not move that beautiful little arse of yours. Do you understand?"

She peered out the window and waited until he entered the inn before exiting the coach. With her reticule in hand and her shawl clutched tightly to hide her exposed cleavage, Jessie strode purposefully across the street to the draper's shop to post the letter. Hopefully they would be able to provide her with a bit of stationery to pen a quick response accepting the position.

She squeezed between the tables piled with bundles of fabric to walk to the back of the shop. She stopped for a moment and slid her fingers over a bolt of crimson satin. The fabric that would suit a viscount's wife, she thought. A *true* viscount's wife, she quickly amended. On a sigh, she withdrew her hand from the beautiful satin. Certainly a governess would never have call to wear such finery.

Mr. Jenkins, the proprietor, looked up from his work as she approached. He was scissoring through a great swath of damask.

"Mr. Jenkins, I need to post a letter. Would you be able to provide me with some paper and ink?" She pulled a few coins from her bag.

"Certainly, Miss Nash." He finished cutting the damask and then, with swift efficiency, folded the two halves of the cloth. With a smile, he plucked the coins from her and cleared a spot on his cluttered desk. She hurriedly scribbled a response. Her shoulders were nearly to her ears. She kept expecting to hear the sound of gunfire coming from the inn. She clamped the quill between her fingers yet her writing looked shaky. She hoped her penmanship would not create a poor impression.

After referring to the man's letter, she copied out his address then folded and sealed the letter with the gum Mr. Jenkins had provided.

Mr. Jenkins was often careless about his postal duties. Jessie would not have been surprised if other people's letters had been mislaid in the pile atop his desk. "I would be very appreciative if this letter is included in the next batch of mail." She handed him the letter along with enough copper to pay for postage and encourage his cooperation.

She began weaving her way between the fabric laden tables.

"Do wait, Miss Nash. My wife has finished your dress."

Luck was with her, it seemed. The dress gave her a perfect excuse to be visiting the draper's. She turned back to Mr. Jenkins with a smile.

Jessie stepped out of the shop feeling as though she'd accomplished something. As she half expected, she did not make it back to the coach before her husband. He had a rather grim look on his face when he held the door open for her.

He glanced from the draper's shop to her then stared pointedly at the packet she held. "I thought I'd been quite clear. And as I recall—" though his tone had been calm at first as he continued speaking it deepened to an angry growl, "—I told you to keep your arse parked on that seat."

"I needed to fetch my dress for the Ducketts' party. I'd brought it in for alterations when last I visited Lucy. It's seasons old. But lilac has since come back in fashion, so I thought it might do."

He raised his brows at all her blather and heaved a sigh.

Once started, it seemed she couldn't stop herself; his silence was too accusatory. "I'd instructed the seamstress to add a French gauze skirt over the silk." She peeled back one of the corners of the paper to give him a glimpse of the lilac fabric. "I've had Mrs. Jenkins trim the hem with lace scallops and add bangles to the satin arm bands and—"

He pressed two fingers to her lips.

"Enough about the bloody dress. I'm far more curious about the correspondence you mailed." He removed his fingers from her lips and her tongue no longer felt so nimble.

The driver shifted on the box. Jessie figured he was angling himself within better hearing range. Ryder, obviously noticing as well, gave his servant a sideways glance before returning his full attention to Jessie.

He addressed her in a low voice so as not to be overheard by the prying driver. “Your advertising has paid off and now you have been offered a position in Brighton. Thus the hurry to post a letter. Correct?”

His assumption hit the mark with startling accuracy. Unnerved, she managed a shrug in response. So he had destroyed her first attempt to compose an advertisement.

“Go get the letter back.”

“I most certainly will not,” she said in a hushed tone that hissed with anger. She flinched as his expression turned thunderous.

He took hold of her elbow and marched her across the street. At the door of the draper’s shop, she balked. With a flare of his nostrils, he dropped his grip on her arm and, ducking under the low lintel, entered the shop.

In moments, he exited with letter in hand. He proceeded to rip it into strips. “I know you resent being bound to a man who was once a convict.” He stuffed the shredded paper into his pocket. “But do act the cooperative wife and get into the bloody carriage.” Ryder climbed atop the box and grabbed the reins from the driver.

Jessie clambered aboard to find Lucy, smelling of sweet perfume, ensconced in the sleek coach. Instinctively, Jessie leaned over and gave her a hug.

“Your man, is he coming?” she asked. She was trembling.

Jessie pointed to the ceiling. “He is riding outside.” She reached over and took Lucy’s frail hand in hers.

“More than a bit intimidating, that one. Had Retscliff bowing and scraping. ‘Yes, my lord. Whatever you’d like, my lord’. What a sight that was.”

On the trip back, Jessie discovered that Lucy was as much in the dark as she was about Lord Blackwood’s mysterious actions.



Once inside the manor, she settled Lucy, who looked quite peaked, before the fire in the library. Jessie decided to put on less seductive clothing. She chose a prim and proper dress she rarely wore. Despite Lord Blackwood’s denials, she was still convinced that Lucy would be the next female to share his bed. She should have feigned illness to get out of dinner, to avoid the inevitable pain of seeing him flirt with another woman, but her

curiosity was raging. After inspecting the dining room, she found the table set for six. Lord Blackwood was expecting other guests for this odd evening.

Jessie heard the door open and a man introduced himself as Constable Jeffers to the new housekeeper. She stopped dead in the hallway, and her pulse took up a rapid beat. Hadn't he threatened this from the beginning, saying that when he tired of her he'd have the lot of them carted off to prison? If he truly believed her so prideful that she was ashamed of his prison past, then wouldn't seeing her suffer the same fate be the ultimate revenge? Only Lewis would avoid the fate. At least, for this evening. Unless he was already in prison. She hadn't seen him in weeks. And Lucy was here so that Lord Blackwood would not have to suffer a night alone.

Jessie couldn't seem to put one foot in front of the other. Hearing his steps on the stairs, she thrust her hands out in front of her. She put her wrists together. "Do you have some irons you'd like to clap on me?"

"Not at the moment. Perhaps later." Ryder's lips quirked into a completely irresistible smile.

He tucked her hand in the crook of his arm and took her to greet his guest. "I'd like you to meet—"

"Miss Nash, Henry's stepdaughter," she interjected. Ryder's nostrils flared slightly, a sure sign that he was annoyed. She'd only thought to spare them both from having to explain. She was certain he regretted making the mistake of introducing her as his wife to William.

The constable gave her a respectful bow, his shiny bald pate reflecting the candlelight from the chandelier. The man was nearly as tall as his host and as broad. He grasped his hat between nervous fingers, his gaze drifting to the high ceiling as Lucy's had done.

When the next guest arrived, she realized Lewis had not escaped either.

They assembled around the dining table. Someone had managed to coax Henry down to dinner, but he hadn't bothered to change out of his dingy neckcloth or shabby coat. He inspected Lucy, his mouth curling into a repulsive smile. "His tastes run low, just like his sire. Likes to skim the scum from the brothels for his pleasure," he muttered under his breath. Thankfully, Lucy was not close enough to hear his ugly words.

"Have you come to drag the bastard back to Newgate, Constable?" Henry asked.

Constable Jeffers responded with diplomatic silence.

Jessie sat expectantly at the table, waiting and watching for a cue that would tell her that her world was about to crumble. Ryder's face gave nothing away. Though he did not flirt openly, his attention, as she'd expected, was drawn to Lucy. It felt as if an icy knot had settled in her stomach. She drank her wine for courage. After her glass had been refilled for the third time by a very efficient maid, she did catch her husband's attention. He raised one dark brow in admonition. Too bloody bad, she thought, she intended to enjoy what might be the last night of her freedom. She raised her glass to him in challenge. He looked far from pleased with her gesture.

"Does the slut practice the black arts as well?" Henry nearly shouted.

Jessie cringed. A dark flush spread over the constable's bald head.

Lucy dropped her spoon with a clatter. She jumped to her feet, overturning her chair. Her face had drained of all color. "I know who you are." She pointed a shaking finger at him. "She told us about you. How you'd jabber on about the black arts and witches. Preached at her 'til she was ill with it."

"Made her ill, bah. That whore never heeded a word I uttered." He took a taste of soup, his thin lips smacking with satisfaction.

Lucy's delicate frame shook with rage.

"She's long dead now," Henry laughed. "No need to quake with indignation on her account."

"Who's dead, sir?" the constable asked.

"The witch at Retscliff's place. Done the whoring wench a good turn. Though she hardly merited it. Exorcised every ounce of evil from her."

Jessie flinched as Henry suddenly reached over and drew his finger along her neck just below the jaw line.

Ryder was on his feet in an instant and looming with menace over his uncle.

Henry's eyes glinted with wicked glee. "If you cut just so, you need not score deeply to release the demons."

"Not such delicate work you did on poor Miss Maggie, I'm afraid," the constable said as he pushed himself away from the table. He placed his napkin neatly at his place setting. "It's best you come with me, sir," he said calmly to Henry.

"You vicious, crazed old fool." Lucy flung herself over the table and swiped her fingernails across Henry's face, leaving bloody tracks on the crinkled skin of his cheek.

Ryder caught her by the waist and tugged her away, but not before she managed to slash a bloody stripe down the old man's nose. Henry shrieked as if he'd been mortally wounded.

Only moments after the constable led a dazed and mewling Henry to his carriage, Lewis began spouting. "Mad bastard. Never thought him capable of that." He helped himself to some of Ryder's best cognac. "Though, he was awful cruel to poor Jessie."

"How so, Lewis?" Ryder asked.

Lewis swiveled in his chair to face Jessie. "I'm shocked you haven't told him." Lewis turned to Ryder again. "Did you never stop to wonder how he'd convinced her to marry a convict?"

Jessie wanted to crawl under the table.

"He beat the devil out of her."

With murder in his eyes, Ryder stalked the length of the room. "And where the hell were you, Lewis, when all this was happening?"

Jessie could sense Lewis's sudden fear. "Do not blame Lewis. He did everything he could to stop it," she lied. Though there were times Lewis would intervene, his attempts were feeble, at best. Jessie pressed her hands to her hot cheeks. Lucy sidled up to Jessie and clutched her against her breast.

"Truly," Jessie averred when she gauged the doubt still lingering in Ryder's eyes. "What would you have had him do? Kill his own father?"

Though Ryder's hands were still clenched in fists, his shoulders relaxed.

Believing she'd averted a disaster and lacking the heart to watch how the rest of the evening unfolded, Jessie hurried out of the room on wobbly legs.

Taking advantage of the luxurious option of having servants in the house to tend to her needs, she stopped a maid and requested a bath be filled in her dressing room. Exhausted, she wanted to hide away, immerse herself in hot water and forget about what might be going on in the dining room.

Steam clouded her mirrors so she did not have to view her tear stained face. She rested her cheek against the cool porcelain and was near to drowsing when Lucy slid like an apparition into the dim room.

Chapter Thirteen

Ryder wasn't surprised by what he discovered in the dressing room, Lucy on her knees by his wife's tub. What he was surprised about was his reaction to the scene. Though it made him hard, it also made him jealous as hell. Lucy was lathering Jessie's breasts with an eye to devouring the rosy nipple nearest her mouth. The positioning of Lucy's body obstructed his view of his wife's face. At the sight of him, Lucy gave a guilty start and dropped the washing cloth. He could see Jessie's face clearly now. She was fast asleep.

With Lucy watching and being the selfish bastard he was, he nudged Jessie's knee so that her legs fell open. Getting down on his haunches by the tub, he plunged his hand into the cooling water and slipped a finger deep inside her. Jessie jolted, grabbing instinctively for the invading hand. Her dark lashes fluttered open, and she smiled the most inviting smile.

Muffling a frustrated cry with her fist, Lucy escaped the room. Jessie appeared unaware of either her presence or departure. Her gaze heavy with desire, she stared at his mouth. Her hand moved up his crisp shirtfront and smoothed over his throat, her thumb stroking his Adam's apple. He wondered if she could feel his pulse thundering. It was primal, this need she inspired in him.

With reluctance, he slid his finger out of her and hooked his arm beneath her legs. "You'll catch a chill. Put your hands around my neck."

"I'll soak your clothes."

But taking the time to do it properly, to fetch the bath sheet, would mean he would have to leave off touching her for a moment, and he wasn't willing to do that. Without waiting for her cooperation, he scooped her out of the tub. With a giggle she snatched the bath sheet from the dressing table as he carried her past it. He kicked open the door to the bedchamber. He sat on the edge of the bed, her bottom pressed provocatively on his erection. Her body glistened with drops of water. He wanted to lick them off one by one.

Her nipples were an edible pink. He gently tugged on one of them and watched as she curled her toes into the bedding.

She raked his hair back from his face, tucking it behind his ear, and traced his jaw line with her finger.

A lump formed in his throat. "I need you to believe that I'd never equated coercion with beatings. That was an evil of which even I'd not suspected the bastard capable. It is no wonder you resent me." It was a good thing the constable had dragged his uncle from the house. Feeble-minded or not, his uncle deserved execution. If Henry had remained, Ryder would have snuffed the life from him with no regret.

She dropped her gaze, her thick lashes demurely shadowing her cheeks. "How could I hold you to blame for any of it? We were both duped." She climbed off his lap, and his fingers grazed her satiny skin. He wished to pull her back to him, but she moved toward the hearth. She began toweling herself dry then covered her nakedness by wrapping the bath sheet around her. "I'm thankful those hard facts were spoken tonight. Perhaps we shall both find a measure of freedom through the truth."

The word "freedom" suddenly held ominous overtones. He crossed the room to stand in front of her. Instantly, she pressed her towel-wrapped body against him and tugged his face down to meet hers. He could not help but feel she wanted to occupy his mouth so he would not question her choice of words. He resisted temptation and stiffened his neck. He peered intently into her eyes. "What do you mean to imply with the word 'freedom'?"

"Nothing. Everything." With a pout of her pretty lips, she dropped her hands from his neck and slid from his grasp. She took a seat by the fire and stretched her legs out to warm her feet. "All these questions are giving me a headache."

"It was a single question," he said. She refused to look at him. His heart thundered with warning. Only moments ago she was smiling sweetly at him; now she was insulating herself against him. The evening had turned on the word "freedom".

Her expression was placid as she contemplated the firelight. But she could not calm her breathing. Her breasts rose and fell rapidly.

He moved to stand beside the settee. "So is this to be one of those nights you spoke of, where a wife refuses her husband?"

She turned her head to look at him. Her gaze dropped down and focused on his erection. Her pink tongue flicked suggestively at the corner of her plush lips. "Definitely not one of those nights." Lifting her blonde hair out from under her, she lay back on the cushions then scooted her bottom to the end of the settee. She draped her legs over the

arm of it. In invitation, she elevated her bottom, propping it atop the armrest. Her back was bowed and her cunt, though still covered by the towel, was presented to him in a most vulnerable manner.

He cast off his cravat, coat and waistcoat. “How very accommodating. Needn’t worry, sweeting. I’ll make quick work of it.” Frustration made him feel savage.

Her green eyes glittered up at him. “I don’t want it quick. I want it slow and thick.” Gripping his hips with her feet, she urged him forward. There was defiance in her actions. It was a rejection of the affection he wished to lavish on her. She wanted him, but she preferred him at a distance. At this angle, kissing her was impossible.

He wedged his thighs between her legs and peeled off the towel. Exposed, her nipples instantly hardened. He skimmed his hands along the inside of her creamy thighs and was rewarded with an answering shiver. He wet his finger in his mouth and stroked it over her slit.

A deep feral groan escaped him. When he rubbed his thumb over the slick sweetness of her, her whole body trembled with pleasure. He unfastened his trousers and shoved them off.

“Pull your legs up and bend your knees.” The entire lower half of her body now balanced precariously on the arm of the settee. Her cunt was at the perfect height and so exposed, so explicitly displayed that he groaned again. He gripped her shins to give himself leverage and to allow him to spread her even wider. Which he immediately did. He pressed down on her legs, splaying her wantonly. His cock twitched with anticipation at the sight of her tight, delicious hole. He positioned his shaft and without pause shoved himself to the hilt. She gasped at his merciless entry. Her delicate neck arched and she clutched at the cushions. Frustrated that his shirt obstructed his view of where they were joined, he tore it off, sending buttons pinging off the floor.

Her lids fluttered with each hot-blooded stroke. A satisfying wet sound accompanied his thrusts as if her cunt were sucking him in. Another forceful stroke and her back curved higher, her puckered nipples pointing provocatively. He desperately wanted to taste them.

She seemed to sense his impending release and quickly shifted out from under him so that he would spill his seed outside her body. She’d moved prematurely. He wrapped his hand around his cock to finish the job. Damn it. It was his masculine prerogative to decide when and if he was ready to be a father. It was only a fleeting, unspoken

complaint because in an instant she kneeled on the cushions and took his cock in her mouth.

The glow from the hearth gilded her skin. She clutched him, her delicate fingers digging into his thighs as she smoothed her soft lips down the length of him. Her shiny mane, which shimmered with golden lights, was long enough to graze the dimples above her buttocks. She was perfection. He stroked her silken skin and felt her tiny waist narrowing further and her ribs made prominent as her whole body strained to please him. She suckled him with such fervor that it took all his willpower not to pour himself into her mouth. Smashed against the armrest, her breasts plumped teasingly. He reached between their bodies and rubbed his thumbs over the top curve of her nipples. His touch elicited a purring sound that vibrated against his cock. She gripped the armrest and her mouth began to ride him. He controlled his animal instincts. He wanted to drive deeper, to touch the back of her throat, to increase the rhythm.

Ryder swept her hair over one shoulder and tilted his head to watch. Her beautiful mouth was opened wide as though she wished to devour him. His cock glistened as her wet mouth glided back and forth. The sight made his entire body throb with pleasure. A few more sinful slides and his cock pulsed with release and she cupped his balls, kneading them to empty him completely. As she gulped his seed then drew the tip of her tongue along the slit as a final erotic measure, her feet curled and a telltale shiver ran down her back.

When she sat back on her heels, he took note of the dreamy lids half obscuring her eyes and the blush of satisfaction that pinkened her cheeks. They were undeniable clues confirming what he'd suspected—that she'd found satisfaction. Such a reaction to pleasuring him should make him as cocksure as the devil. But he could not forgive her distancing attitude toward him. Despite her feverish attention to his body, he'd felt a distinct chill wrap around his heart.

He yanked up his trousers. "Impressively dutiful. Swallowing every drop like that." After he acknowledged her service to him by pantomiming a tip of the hat, he strode to the book cabinet and pushed the books aside to find his flask of whiskey. The liquid warmed his insides, but did nothing to mellow the panic churning in his gut. He heard her pad barefoot across the room, throw back the coverlet and crawl into bed.

"I think you're angry at me," she said.

“How intuitive. Christ, I’ve had whores treat me with more tenderness.” He returned the now empty flask to the bookcase, shed the remainder of his clothing and joined her in bed.

He stacked his hands behind his head and stared up at the ceiling. “Next time, perhaps you could show me a little fondness.”

Silence that could shatter a man’s faith met his statement.

Their earlier conversation plagued him. What in holy hell had she meant by freedom? And of course there was the letter to the stranger in Brighton. It seemed all of one torturous piece. Like a man obsessed, he could not seem to let the subject rest. He tried another tack. “A gentleman might release a woman from the obligation of vows made under such duress,” he said. His plan to eventually be rid of her had been complete and utter rot. There wasn’t a way in the world he would ever part with her.

“Most assuredly a gentlemanly thing to do,” she mumbled sleepily.

Had he, in his entire life, heard a response less to his liking? It was so completely the wrong thing for her to say. She should have pledged her everlasting love and fidelity.

“Damnation, that would not be a chivalric gesture,” he said, amending his initial statement. It had only been meant as a prod to get an avowal of love. “It’s a damned saint-like gesture. And I am no bloody saint.”

“A surer truth has never been spoken,” she said with a laugh. The delightful sound thrummed through his blood. She rolled into him and curled her body snugly against his. She placed one delicate hand atop his chest.

Cupping her naked bottom, he tucked her tighter to his side. “That’s more like it.” He could finally relax a little.

He stroked her hair and found strands adhering to her damp cheeks. At what point had she cried? And, more importantly, why?

Chapter Fourteen

The night of the party had come and Jessie's hands were so shaky she could barely manage to put in the pearl earrings Lord Blackwood had given her. She tried not to put too much emphasis on the fact they once belonged to his mother. They'd been the only pieces of jewelry that Lewis had not looted.

They were the perfect adornment for the lilac dress.

She sat before her dressing mirror as Mary fashioned a chignon and ornamented it with an aigrette of pearls, another gift from the viscount. She'd never had someone help her dress before. She wanted to cry over the absurdity of it. This night marked the end of the marriage, yet it was the only time she'd been treated as the pampered mistress of Lord Blackwood's estate.

The maid plucked at the ringlets that framed her face. Jessie waved her away. "Mary, do stop fussing. You've done wonders."

It was only after Lord Blackwood stepped into the room that Mary hastened to leave.

He shut the door behind him and strode across the room to stand behind her. Her breath grew shallow. He looked utterly dangerous and absolutely tempting in his perfectly fitted, stark black evening clothes.

"Beautiful," he said, and scooped his fingers beneath her daringly low neckline. "Now take it off. I want you before we go." He plunged his fingers in deeper to squeeze one of her nipples. He lowered his mouth to her ear, his warm breath sending shivers up her spine. "I'm desperate for you."

She breathed in the clean, masculine scent of him and stifled a sigh. It took every ounce of self-possession to take his hand from her breast. "No. Not ever again. This evening is a new beginning for both of us. As decided, this marriage is at an end."

He straightened to his imposing height. A muscle in his jaw jumped.

She tried for a light laugh. “How often did you tell me you would kick me out on my bottom? I’m trying to make this easier for you. It is what you’ve wanted, an end to this deceit.”

He raked back his sleek black hair. The muscles in his jaw were still twitching. “You know I no longer hold you to blame. I have apologized.”

“True, but it took Lewis to convince you. You never once believed me. And even if I hadn’t wanted to deceive you, it does not change the fact that the marriage is a sham.”

“I realize there were times I acted a complete and utter bastard, but you must know that from the start I considered you mine. You were always safe with me. Always.”

Pain seemed to resonate in his voice. Or was it an imagined echo of what she was feeling? Truth was, she had never felt secure. Only last night she’d expected the constable to drag her away. “Tonight I am attending as Miss Nash, your relation by way of your uncle’s marriage—”

“Admit it. It is you who want freedom from me.”

“Do not sound so harsh. What difference whose idea it is?” she said, as she tugged on her white kid gloves.

She took a paper from her dressing table and handed it to him. “I’m taking that position as governess in Brighton. A widower with three young children. Since you tore up my letter of acceptance, I will just present myself at the man’s doorstep.” She stood, retrieved her shawl and snatched up her fan. “I am grateful you allowed Lewis to stay on and settle his father’s affairs. Now that Henry is gone, having a stepbrother in residence will ward off scandal. I’d like to leave before any ugly whispers start.”

“If you had allowed me to introduce you to Constable Jeffers as my wife, *as I’d wished to*, scandal would have been averted.”

“To be sure, a clandestine marriage to a notorious villain such as yourself would surely not have started tongues wagging.” She’d said it playfully, but it only served to increase his anger.

“Shall we go?” she asked. Her skirt brushed against his legs as she swept out of the room.

She could feel him at her back like a malevolent force as she headed down the staircase.

“Just think of all the beauties who will be vying for your attention,” she said, trying to mollify him. She bit her lip to stop it from quivering.

"That widower will fall instantly in love with you," he growled, as if he hadn't heard a word she'd said. "You will be raising another man's children."

He sounded insulted and hurt. The gall of the man. Hadn't he made it abundantly clear he did not want her to have his babies?

She was more than happy to see William waiting in the entrance hall.

William's eyes blinked wide as he watched her approach. He blew out a low whistle. "You won't be taking her out lookin' like that, will you, lad? You'll have a riot on your hands."

Clearly irritated, Ryder seized his top hat and greatcoat from William, who stood immobile, his pale blue eyes glued to her.

She wrapped her shawl around her shoulders. "He won't be taking me at all. I've arranged to go with our neighbor, Miss Whitcomb."

"You are riding with me," Ryder insisted.

He reached for her and she moved quickly out of his way. She threw open the door and stepped out into the crisp night air. With relief, she could see Miss Whitcomb's carriage in the distance. "Punctual as always," she said with undisguised relief.

Lord Blackwood donned his hat. His back stiffened as the carriage pulled into the drive. He raised an arm for her to take, and she eyed him suspiciously. "You've made it clear you want nothing to do with me anymore. I only mean to be polite."

She wrapped her gloved fingers around his massive arm. He closed his hand around hers to lead her to the carriage. It seemed both their hands were trembling.



A suspenseful hush greeted Jessie the instant she entered the Ducketts' home. She overheard the deflated sighs of some women standing nearby when they realized Lord Blackwood had not accompanied her. Clearly, they expected the formidable viscount to provide the evening's thrill.

A feeling of loneliness overtook her. Rather than immerse herself in the festivities, she chose to sit beside Miss Whitcomb in a recessed room devoted to card games.

Her gaze strayed in the direction of the hall. Where the devil was he? It was ridiculous to think her rejection of him would cause him to take up his vice again, and yet she couldn't help worrying.

Unfortunately, she did not blend in with the wallpaper for long. The twins soon discovered her. They immediately suffocated her with attention. Joseph, elegant in his military regalia, plied her with weak lemonade. And Jeffrey tried to woo her onto the dance floor. When his voice took on a pleading note, she finally relented and let him lead her out.

The chandeliers glittered with tiny candles making the polished floor gleam like the night sky. The ornate mirrors that lined the room intensified the light. She caught her sad-eyed reflection in the silvered glass and felt sorry for Jeffrey. Peering into his eager face, she attempted a smile as they partnered off for the minuet.

When Lord Blackwood finally arrived, his entrance was heralded with awed whispers and a fluttering of fans. She caught glimpses of him as her partner circled her. Lord Blackwood acknowledged people with a curt nod or a few words as he walked the edges of the room. Not walked—prowled. Like an animal on the hunt, and she felt the prey.

“Will you honor me again?” Jeffrey asked the instant the music died away.

“I think I need some fresh air,” she said, and he fell in step with her as she walked toward the garden doors.

“It is terribly hot in here. Perhaps we should take a turn on the balcony,” Jeffrey suggested.

“Or perhaps not.”

Jeffrey flinched at the sound of the deep, intimidating voice. With a wary expression, he turned to face the man behind him. “Lord Blackwood, I did not realize the young lady was with you.” Jeffrey tugged uneasily at his cravat.

Lord Blackwood gave a slight bow and put his arm out for Jessie to take. The room was instantly silent, as if everyone waited for her reaction to the infamous viscount. She was certain there had been curious whispers about their relationship. Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed the staring faces. In this public arena, she would not shun him even if it meant the ruin of her own reputation. Though he seemed indifferent to people’s opinions of him, she felt he deserved respect, not fear. With an air of nonchalance, she accepted his arm and allowed him to escort her out onto the deserted balcony.

She wrapped her gloved hands around the railing and breathed in the exotic scent of the nocturnal blooms. The warm, fragrant night brought back a memory of Africa, when she and her father danced beneath the canopy of a massive baobab tree as they listened to the far off sounds of tribal drums.

Ryder placed a warm kiss at the nape of her neck that made her body tremble with pleasure.

"Miss Nash, is everything all right?" Miss Whitcomb held the door ajar, reluctant to step out onto the balcony.

Before she had an opportunity to reply, Lord Blackwood spoke. "Everything is fine. I merely wanted to enjoy the starlit night with my wife."

Jessie gave his tailcoat a hard tug, but it did not stop him from explaining further.

"I'm afraid my wife was not feeling very kindly toward me tonight and thought it great fun to taunt me. But, I assure you, Miss Nash *is* Lady Blackwood."

Miss Whitcomb shut the door with a rattle of the glass panes.

"Splendid. Within seconds the entire party will know," Jessie said.

Jessie wondered if he had turned to opium again. He was acting so irrationally. She looked up into his eyes to see if the pupils were constricted, but the candles in the wall sconces provided little illumination. "Please tell me you haven't indulged those cravings tonight."

"I haven't. You would not let me touch you, if you recall," he said resentfully.

She felt her cheeks warm with a blush. "I was not referring to that."

"No laudanum for me tonight. Though you may drive me to it."

"That is blackmail."

He shrugged. "Whatever it takes."

He took her hand and pulled her with him. "Come."

They entered a side entrance to the gardens of the estate. The moonlight threw eerie shadows on the sculptures set among the roses, giving the carvings sinister qualities. Ryder headed straight for a tall, precisely trimmed hedge.

"Have the Duckett twins ever lured you into their garden maze?" he asked as he brushed the loose hair from her face.

"Their mother would never have allowed it," she said. "I would never have allowed it."

His white teeth shone in the moonlight as he grinned. "Exactly the answer I was hoping for." He motioned her forward down a narrow path lined on both sides by ten-foot tall, smoothly trimmed hedges.

The dark corners of the maze were frightening and Jessie reached back for his hand. "Shall we turn back now?" she asked.

"No. I will tell you when we have reached our destination."

She felt as if they were going in circles. She tightened her grip on his hand. "You certainly made it more difficult for yourself tonight. Now when you divorce me, the whole of the countryside shall know of it."

He stopped abruptly and yanked her toward him. She bumped her nose into his hard chest. "Stop scaring the holy hell out of me. There will be no divorce. Not ever. It will be my children that you raise. Our children."

She took hold of his lapels and peered up into his face. She could only make out the glint in his eyes. "Why?" she asked simply.

"Because I love you, Jess. I love you so much it makes me desperate. There is nothing I would not do to keep you with me."

His admission left her speechless. He tucked her against his side and they continued walking deeper into the spiraling maze.

"You are not afraid of getting lost?"

"I did have a life before my incarceration. Invitations were offered with less reluctance in those days."

Suddenly, they were in a round clearing where the moonlight cast a warm glow. It was empty except for a large, carved bench.

"We are at the center." He released her, and she strolled the enchanted circle, letting her fingertips brush along the hedges.

"Do you recall promising to give me *anything* when I handed you that pistol?"

"I haven't forgotten." She thought of the incident often. It made her heartsick reliving that desperate moment when his uncle had attempted to coerce him into suicide.

"Well, this marriage is what I want. And I would appreciate a little reassurance, Jess. At least tell me you don't hate me. And that you won't leave me."

"I don't hate you," she said, and then hesitated a heart-stuttering moment before adding, "and I won't leave you."

"Fine," he said curtly, clearly hoping for a different reply. "Then get naked, wife, before I die of want."

She was so eager for his touch her hands trembled as she removed her gown and petticoats. She left her stays on, thinking it too much trouble to put them back on again.

He folded his tailcoat and waistcoat and set them at the end of the long bench.

"There *are* things about you that I do love," she said and boldly unfastened his trousers. She untied his drawers and shoved them off his hips. Her hand molded around his thick hard shaft.

She smoothed her hand down the length of him. "I also love these." Her other hand weighed the heavy sacs that dangled between his thighs. She brought the cream that had formed at the tip of his cock to her lips. "And the taste of you."

"Tease." He started to loosen the lacings of her stays.

She tried to brush his hands away, but he insisted on having her completely nude. He did not allow her the same privilege. He took hold of her wrists when she attempted to remove his shirt. Taking a seat on the stone bench, he pulled her to him, his erection, as always, an impressive sight. She straddled his thighs.

"I want you completely undone." He reached up and began pulling the pins from her hair.

With a cry of protest, she batted at his hands. "How will I return to the party?" Despite her objections, her hair tumbled, the pearl aigrette falling to the grass. With a sly smile he combed his fingers through her waist-length tresses. His touch was electric.

"Anxious to return to your dance partner?"

Her gaze drifted over his face then focused on his strong, beautiful mouth. "He is extraordinarily handsome," she said in a breathy whisper. She was dizzy just from looking at him. She ran her forefinger along his sensuous bottom lip.

With a carnal smile, he cupped her breasts in his big hands and swirled his thumbs roughly over her taut nipples. She put her hands on his knees behind her, jutting her breasts forward, giving him more access. He dipped his head. His hot mouth clamped over one of her nipples and sucked hard. His midnight black hair curtained his face. It felt like silk against her skin. He shifted his mouth. His recently shaven jaw smoothed over her breasts, and he pulled the other nipple between his teeth. A soft mewl escaped her lips as her pussy clenched with craving.

He lifted his head and studied her face. Behind the burning desire in his eyes, she thought she detected a flicker of sadness. She clutched his strong shoulders and placed her knees on the stone bench on either side of his muscular thighs. She lifted herself onto

him. With exquisite slowness, she impaled herself. She rode him hard. A soft cry escaped her lips every time she descended, absorbing the full impact of his shaft. The muscles in her thighs trembled. Her movements became uncontrolled. Insisting on a driving rhythm, he began to lift her and bring her down with force. Her head lolled back, her hair brushing against his legs.

The muscles in his shoulders tensed as he reached for climax. She attempted to pull up, but his fingers dug into her hips, holding her firm as he emptied his seed into her. *He finally trusts me.* Her heart expanded with joy. She collapsed against his shoulder with a shuddering sob. Her tears wilted the crisp linen of his shirt.

“Have I hurt you?” he asked.

She managed only a shake of her head as she clumsily disengaged herself from his embrace. She accepted the handkerchief he gave her, but instead of drying her tears, she used it to clean the precious liquid that dripped down her thighs.

He yanked up his trousers. “Trying to rid yourself of me. Bloody great.”

“I’ve already soaked your shirt through. I was hoping to spare your trousers.”

“Right,” he said fiercely.

He was soon back in his full elegant evening attire looking every bit the viscount while she stood naked and vulnerable in the circle of moonlight.

With deft fingers, he helped lace up her stays. “I realize you were forced into this marriage. That I’m no prize. I can be uncivilized, a downright beast at times. And you must tire of the demands I place on you—”

“I rather enjoy those demands.”

“Jess, do you care for me at all?” His voice was raw.

She turned around and wrapped her hands around his neck, pulling his mouth down to hers.

A frown creased his brow. He seemed aware the kiss was a way to avoid answering him. But he cradled her chin in his hands and returned the kiss with such tenderness that tears pricked her eyes. Perhaps tonight in bed she would have the courage to bare her heart to him.

Once she’d donned her petticoat and dress, she refashioned her hair into a much simpler chignon than the maid had created. Knowing that the pearl net would be impossible to put back in her coiffure, she tucked it into his pocket. They would surely create a scandalous stir.

He enfolded her hand in his, and they retraced the path through the maze. They stepped out of the shadows to find a small crowd of party members clustered around the exit with candles alight. It was a rescue mission. They'd come to save her from the monster, the deadly viscount.

Jeffrey puffed his chest out like a bantam cock as he approached, but his fear was palpable. Even Joseph, who'd experienced battle, looked worried, his face washed of color.

Joseph put his hand on the hilt of his saber. Had he worn the weapon all night? She hadn't noticed. She stepped in front of Ryder. "You'll have to run that through both of us." Even before she heard Ryder's deep chuckle, she realized how silly and melodramatic her words sounded. But she didn't trust this civilized, yet agitated, mob.

"Stand aside, Miss Nash. The man's not to be trusted."

"You know nothing of him. You base all your knowledge on gossip and untruths."

A querying murmur traveled through the crowd.

"How many of you could have withstood the horrors of Newgate, *especially* knowing you were put there unjustly? My husband is an extraordinary man who has been to hell and back. And you should all feel yourself privileged to be acquainted with him." She knew that her voice quavered, but she thrust out her chin with confidence.

Metal scraped ominously against metal as Joseph pulled his sword. "I can only think how this blackguard bullied you. Why else would you defend his unworthy hide?"

"Joseph." Jessie's voice rose to a hysterical level. "If you injure my husband I will never forgive you."

Ryder gripped her waist, lifted her off her feet and set her to his side. "Will you strike an unarmed man, Duckett? Does the military no longer hold honor in high regard? Someone fetch me a like weapon."

There was a shriek and Mrs. Duckett swooned, crumpling to the grass.

Fainting was an entirely appropriate reaction. Ryder's challenge made Jessie frantic as well. Joseph flashing his sword was likely nothing beyond bravado, but Ryder...his was a threat to be taken seriously. She stumbled clumsily, treading on his boots to clutch at his lapels. She did not care if she made a fool of herself clinging and weeping.

"A bit of a handicap. I don't think my opponent has a wife fastened to him." He actually had the audacity to grin.

“This is not amusing,” she said and clasped tighter to him. She heard the unmistakable sound of the saber returning to the scabbard and turned her head to see Joseph stride forward and extend his hand.

“My sincerest apologies.” In the candlelight, she could see that Joseph’s cheeks were darkened with embarrassment.

Jessie released her husband but remained close by his side. Her pulse still pounded thickly in her ears. She held her breath until Ryder reached out and accepted Joseph’s apology.

Joseph took a step back and bowed stiffly. “Clearly, I’ve acted on false assumptions. The esteem of a lady like Miss Nash is hard won.”

“You have *no* idea,” Ryder drawled sarcastically.

Jeffrey was in line behind his brother. He cleared his throat and adjusted his spectacles with trembling fingers. “Seems we’ve misjudged you, Lord Blackwood,” he mumbled. Other men threaded cautiously through the crowd to shake hands with Ryder.

Mrs. Duckett had been helped to her feet. She had a wan smile on her face.

Finally, the crowd scattered. They looked a little dejected, perhaps disappointed in the lack of an explosive finale to the scene.

Ryder whipped Jessie around to face him. “So, you have a high opinion of me, do you?” he said with a self-satisfied smile on his handsome face.

“Oh, all that—” she gave a flippant wave of her hand, “—I was just rattling on.”

He wasn’t buying a bit of it. His arrogant grin widened. “You bloody well love me,” he declared.

Putting her hands on her hips, she said, “You are awfully sure of yourself.”

“Admit it, Jess. You love me. You love your husband.” When she didn’t immediately respond, the certainty of his smile faltered.

She threw herself at him. He felt solid, safe and exciting all at the same time. “Of course I love you. How could I *not*?”

He stroked her hair, which threatened to undo her coiffure again so she wriggled out of his grasp. “We should return.”

“What the devil for?” He yanked her back into his arms and kissed her thoroughly.

“Stubborn man—” she said the words against his mouth then pulled her lips away, “—we need to at least make a civil exit.” She gave his cravat a tug and he reluctantly followed her across the lawn.

Music drifted to them as they stepped onto the balcony.

Ryder chuckled. “A waltz? Mrs. Duckett allows such licentious behavior?”

“No, that is Jeffrey’s sense of humor. He requests a waltz from the musicians and then watches the unease. No one has had the courage to wander onto the dance floor. ’Tis quite amusing to watch the older people pretend not to hear the tune and the younger exchange simmering glances.”

He trailed a seductive finger from the tip of her finger to the top of her glove. “Shall we dance it?”

“You are jesting. We’ve created enough of a stir for one day.” Who was she fooling with her prim attitude? Dancing with the man would be sheer bliss.

Ryder glanced around. “Here on the balcony, then.”

The candles in the sconces had guttered out and the relative darkness made the balcony nearly invisible to those inside yet she hesitated.

“Yes, I do know how to dance,” he said. “Before I was a convict I received invitations and often the settings were not so provincial. I may not be as well-traveled as your phantom scholar, but I have seen some of the world.” He put his hand out and she placed hers into it.

Jessie smiled. “You misunderstand. ’Tis your toes that are in danger.”

“I’ll risk them.”

She peered up into his eyes as he pulled her indecently close, closer she suspected than a waltz was intended to be danced. The size of the balcony limited their movements. But Jessie was both annoyed and impressed by his fluid movements. She felt awkward in comparison. The music would fade in and out but his tempo never faltered. The leisurely turns combined with Ryder’s closeness made her head swoon. “My phantom scholar?” she finally asked, recalling his odd statement. Could he still be bothered by her impulsive utterances in the pond?

He clasped her tighter. “Your ideal husband. The man to whom you wished to confess undying love.”

His shoulder tensed under her hand. Clearly he still yearned to hear a stronger declaration of commitment from her. “I certainly did not admit my feelings for you with

such sarcasm. In fact my heart was nearly breaking knowing my time with you was limited.”

He stopped dancing with such abruptness she made good her prediction and trampled his feet. His poor boots were taking quite a beating tonight, she thought.

She craned her neck to look at him and he seemed stunned by her revelation.

“So you’ve loved me all along, little witch?”

She shrugged then stood on her tiptoes and kissed him lightly on the lips. “Not all along...but mostly.”

About the Author

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Look for these titles by Scottie Barrett

Now Available:

Carnal Deceptions

Tess Starling is willing to risk everything—and offer anything—to avenge her father's death.

Carnal Deceptions

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Available now at Samhain Publishing

Upon leaving her father's gravesite, Tess spies creditors confiscating the finery of her first London Season. But her gowns will do little to satisfy her father's debts. Fleet Prison awaits her. Tess dons a homely disguise, cloaking herself in mourning weeds. She is determined to evade the authorities until she brings to justice the swindler who ruined her father. Resolute in her quest, she will transform anew, reinventing herself as a temptress to seduce the villain. She only wants for hands-on training, but the man who volunteers proves too much of a distraction. Everything about Tallon Hawkes, the Earl of Marcliffe, fascinates, including the battle scars marking his body. A motivated pupil, Tess yields eagerly to his sexual demands.

Long before he discovers the sensuous female beneath the layers of black crepe...long before he discovers the brilliant copper-colored tresses hidden by the ratty wig...long before he tastes the sweetness of her skin, Tallon Hawkes' heart has been hooked. Tallon plays along with Tess's scheme, but he is distrustful and jealous of her obsession with their shared enemy. Tallon is determined to bring her dangerous game to an end. But will his arrogant maneuver lose him any chance with Tess?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Carnal Deceptions*:

The next morning, Tess woke to find herself tangled in her blankets. She'd been dreaming of satin and silk and erotic couplings. The explicit pictures that Miss Midwinter had shown her were branded on her brain. A woman bound with ropes, lifting her bottom in offering as she waited for the man to plunge into her. A woman servicing three men at once. Miss Midwinter had added her own narrative, describing the sexual acts depicted so graphically Tess had been forced to open the window to the chill morning air to cool her cheeks. All her lessons lacked were practice. Her dreams had revealed a deep hunger for that real experience. Unfortunately, in every dream Lord Marcliffe was the man she explored with her mouth and hands and body. She'd slid satin over the smooth skin of his chest until it snagged on the rough scars of his shoulder. More shockingly, she'd followed the trail of the fabric with her open mouth, her tongue tracing every ridge.

Frustrated, she threw her bedclothes aside. She stepped naked out of bed and bathed herself at the washstand. After patting herself dry, she opened the wardrobe and peered into a dark and empty hole. Not even her chemise hung there. She searched the floor, shook out the bedclothes, got on her knees to peer under the bed and found nothing, not a stitch. Even the flannel gown she'd thrown off in the night was gone. She wrapped herself in a blanket. Opening the door a crack, she called for help. No one answered. Her pleas seemed to echo off the walls.

Tess stepped into the hallway and raced down the stairs. There was a queer emptiness to the house. She shivered as her bare feet touched the cold tile floor of the entrance hall. With the heavy blanket dragging behind her, she entered the dining room. No weak tea or burnt toast awaited her. She pushed open the kitchen door expecting to see Mrs. Smith's smiling face, only to find another vacant room. Afraid now, she hurried up the stairs to Lady Stadwell's bedchamber. The door was ajar. She found the wardrobe empty as well as the bureau drawers.

She'd been deserted. She could not go into the yard naked, but she was certain what she would find there. No gardeners, no grooms, and the stable cleared of all horses.

Without question, she knew exactly who had executed this plan, who'd evacuated the house right under her nose. Trembling with fury, she returned to her chamber. Why not take advantage and luxuriate in bed for once? First she fluffed the pillow but then decided to give it a good pounding, until feathers burst from its seams. She settled back on the now flattened pillow, but finding rest in her agitated state proved impossible. With a scream of vexation, she kicked the covers to the floor then with a muttered oath stooped to retrieve the blanket. She had yet to explore Mrs. Smith's room. Determined to thwart the fiendish earl, Tess lit a candle and ascended the servants' stairs. The flame fluttered eerily in the narrow hallway. Muttering a plea for fortune to turn in her favor, she entered the low-ceilinged room. The doors on the small wardrobe were agape, and the barren interior that greeted her seemed a purposeful taunt. Not even a blasted apron remained.

Sparked by another idea, she raced downstairs to see if the mudroom that adjoined the kitchen held at least a rain cloak. The hooks were empty. The bastard had been ruthlessly thorough. If he wanted rid of her so badly, why hadn't he left her some clothing? Clearly, he wished to see her completely humiliated.

She stomped through the empty house. In the parlor, she clutched at the faded damask drapery thinking to yank the curtains from the wall, but the curtain rod was too heavy and well-seated. She would have to take scissors to the fabric. It was an inspiration with little chance of success. Her skills as a seamstress were negligible. Besides, it would take her forever to create a garment. She glanced out the window at the stables. Though

the house was somewhat isolated, certain angles of the yard could be spied from the road, and Tess did not have the courage to go outside mantled only in a blanket. When night fell, she'd fetch the ladder from the barn. She would explore the attic for moth-eaten garments. Surely there had to be remnants of other generations stored. Unable to occupy her mind with reading or anything remotely productive, she curled up on the settee to wait for dusk.

The sky was just starting to gray, the gloomy veil of night dropping, when the front door slammed. Tess flew off the settee and raced into the entrance hall, her bare feet skidding on the slick marble, to find the devil himself, with the two huge mastiffs at his heels. He gave her a placid smile as he pulled off his leather gloves. What was he up to? She didn't trust a hair on his black head.

"W-What is going on? Where is everyone?" she stammered, completely flustered by the idea of being alone with him.

"They left early, just before the sun. I had the cook accompany Lady Stadwell in the carriage so that people would think you'd left with her."

She eyed him suspiciously. "Why would you do that?" Her voice rose to a hysterical pitch and he immediately pressed his fingers to his temples.

Though he appeared stone cold sober, he was suffering the aftereffects of a week of imbibing. His skin was paler than usual and in stark contrast to his black hair. "Because people talk. And since we are just beginning this venture, I felt there was no need to stir up rumors."

Tess pulled the wool blanket tighter, scratching her bare skin. She had never felt so vulnerable. She blinked up in confusion at the most intimidating man she'd ever known. She was at his mercy. Lady Stadwell had abandoned her.

"Is there some reason—" With effort, she squelched the urge to rain curses down on him "—why I have nothing to wear?" Her voice vibrated with fury.

He shrugged. "The dressmaker will have some of your wardrobe completed by the week's end. In the meantime, you won't need any clothing."

"I suppose I'm to lock myself in my room naked until she arrives?"

"No, I expect you to stay in *my* room naked for the week."

She couldn't have understood him correctly. "Pardon?"

"If I'm to hire you for my aunt's dubious scheme, I'd like to see just how capable you are."

"Exactly what does that mean?"

“I intend to fuck you, Miss Calloway.”

Lord Marcliffe was studying her a little too carefully. She suspected he was expecting she'd lose her nerve. He casually combed back his windblown hair with his fingers. How on earth could someone be that handsome and that cruel? “I detest you!”

*Desire and distrust combined...
Can their strange bargain hold when faced with a deadly threat?*

Shadowed Knight

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Lady Margaret D'Arcy has ruled the manor of Warnmark since her father and brother were killed by a vicious outlaw. After six years of independence, to be told that she must marry someone she's never met offends her pride. But outlaws are on the prowl, and the Baron, her feudal overlord, wants Warnmark commanded by a man.

Richard Berenger, the bastard son of a nobleman who cruelly rejected him, has risen to the rank of knight through his own skill and courage. The Baron chooses him to become lord of Warnmark through marriage to Warnmark's lady, though Richard is convinced Lady Margaret will despise him for his low birth.

When these two proud people are ordered to wed, the result is a fierce battle of wills that leads to an uneasy bargain: Margaret must acknowledge Berenger lord and husband in public, but in private, can deny any claim he has on her body or heart. Desperate to keep her home, Margaret agrees—but her resentment lingers.

Then the rogue knight who destroyed her family returns and Margaret and Berenger must work together to save Warnmark.

In the face of such danger, will their strange bargain hold?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Shadowed Knight*:

Freda had left a single candle burning in the chamber on the small table near the bed. Its reflected light washed the stone walls of her niche with a soft, amber glow. Margaret's eyelids grew heavy. If Berenger delayed much longer, she'd not have to pretend she was asleep.

At that moment, the door latch clicked. Margaret closed her eyes, slowed her breathing and waited. Footsteps moved from the door and paused by the cot. Margaret waited, her body tensed, feeling the slow, hard beat of her own heart. The footsteps moved on through into the main chamber and a moment later she heard the rustle of the bedclothes being pulled back.

She forced herself to relax. She felt relief—and a tiny measure of triumph?—that this small act against his will had been so easily accomplished, and yet...did she feel some

disappointment as well? How easily he had accepted her small sacrifice. Proof of his selfishness, surely.

She sighed, remembering the comfort of her wide, down-stuffed mattress. But if Freda found this cot comfortable, she would learn to do so as well. Especially if the alternative was sharing a bed with Richard Berenger. She sighed again, closed her eyes and, after a moment, felt herself slowly sinking into the soft darkness of sleep...

Her only warning was a whisper of sound. Her eyes flew open and she cried out as in one quick instant she was swung aloft in arms as hard and unyielding as bands of iron. She gasped, her body straining against the embrace that threatened to crush her bones.

"Did you think I would allow this?" Berenger said in a voice so deadly that Margaret's breath locked in her throat. "You've yet to truly know me, lady."

He whirled and carried her into the main chamber, laying her on the wide bed. Shocked, too stunned to move, she bit back a gasp as he bent over her.

"Shall I act as tiring woman?" he said between his teeth. In the reflected light, his eyes glittered. Her robe had flung awry, slipping from her shoulder to expose the swell of one breast, opening below her waist to reveal her leg to the thigh. Slowly, Berenger drew the soft wool into place, his fingers moving with deliberate intent as they brushed her skin, his mouth curved in a mocking smile, the gaze of the predatory golden eyes examining every exposed inch of her. She couldn't move, she couldn't breathe, she could only feel, and the touch of those long fingers burned her like hot sparks, making her body tremble and quiver.

It was all she could do not to sob aloud as he slid his hand beneath her head and bent down, his eyes mocking her. For a heart-stopping moment, she thought he would kiss her on the mouth. A moan broke from her and she closed her eyes. But then Berenger laughed, softly, tauntingly, and his lips touched her forehead instead in a caress so chaste it could only be intended as an insult. The deep, mocking voice said, "Sleep well...wife."

Then he was gone, taking the candle, the metal loops of the leather curtain that screened off the alcove rattling across the supporting bar behind him.

For long seconds, Margaret lay rigid, panting; then suddenly her trembling limbs answered her will again and she yanked the bedclothes over her head, grinding her teeth as she fought to keep from shrieking aloud. He, he—! Oh, there weren't words to express the emotions that boiled inside her. Fury, embarrassment, and something else, something that she'd never felt before, a strange, fevered excitement that had shivered through her when he'd touched her. It was, must be, could only be revulsion, so intense that it almost frightened her. And shame? That he'd bested her, bent her to his will, with such ease again. Again!

Damn him! *Bastard, wolf-head.* And she was shackled to him, bound to him for life. She buried her face in the sheets, her fingers clawing at the material.

In the alcove, Richard Berenger moved carefully on the creaking cot, listening to the muffled rustlings of blankets from the main room as he settled himself. His lady was in a rage, no doubt, her pride stung, her haughtiness pricked. *Vixen.* He forced himself to relax, fighting the almost overwhelming urge to rise, cross to that wide, soft bed, fling back the covers and take what by all the laws of man and church was his by right. *His by right.*

That moment when he'd had her stretched half-naked before him, his hands touching her, her skin soft as a new leaf, her hair washed warm gold by the candlelight, her body trembling...and the expression of fear in those sapphire eyes, fear that she'd tried so fiercely to hide. He'd seen that look before, in his mother's eyes when she was called to the bed of the man who so brutally used her—the man who'd sired him. The man he'd vowed he would never become.

He closed his eyes. Through the long, hard years, he'd learned self-control and he called on that now, willing his body to relax, willing his heated blood to cool, counting over the many times that patience had served him well. Yet would it serve him here? What if she never relented, this arrogant, stubborn woman? How long could they live thus, bound together, yet never truly joined?

No. There had to be a way to resolve this enmity, for them to at least learn to tolerate each other, if nothing more. Force her now and she'd hate and fear him for life, as his mother had hated and feared his father. His hunger for her now was almost overwhelming, but satisfy that hunger and he'd earn nothing but life-long regret.

Patience, he told himself again. *Patience.* He'd made a bargain, given his word and he would keep it. He even managed to smile, remembering her startled shriek when he'd caught her up. No doubt his lady had convinced herself that taking the cot was a selfless act on her part. But he'd known instantly what it truly was, a defiance of his will. His smile stretched to a rueful grin as he saw the humor of the situation. The lord and lady of a manor, in absolute control of dozens of lives, squabbling about who slept where like a pair of children. *Still,* he thought, allowing himself a slight moment of pure satisfaction, *I doubt she'll try that again.*

He turned on his side, thinking what a fool he'd look if the cot collapsed under him now, then sighed and closed his eyes, though it was late into the night before his thoughts would let him sleep.

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