

*Always  
My  
Love*



*Phyllis  
Campbell*



Always, My Love  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

**Champagne Books**

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Champagne Books Presents

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### **Dedication**

**I'd like to dedicate this story to my critique partners at Romancing-History, and especially Sydney Miles and Rayka Mennen for following the story to the end.**

## One

### Hereford, England 1850

Catherine Martin's heart twisted. *Marriage*. It wouldn't be so horrid if the man wasn't someone she'd loved as an uncle. Although Grant Fielding wasn't related, he'd been her parents' close friend for as long as she could remember.

Gazing into her full-length mirror, she frowned. Moisture gathered in her eyes from the tumultuous emotions spinning in her head, and a scowl hardened her features. How could she love him any other way now?

Catherine glanced down at her black trimmed, deep purple traveling dress, and sighed heavily. The short waist-jacket accented her figure, making it appear more slender. The color even made her hair shimmer and allowed her skin to take on a creamy complexion.

"Oh, Miss Catherine, keep your chin up," Catherine's maid, Emily, said. "You're certainly going to make an impression on the Duke of Havenwood. The way you look now, you'll take His Grace's breath away."

She shook her head and a lock of wavy hair slipped out of her carefully styled bun, falling across her forehead. "Quick, Emily. Locate my dreariest gown as long as it's wrinkled beyond compare. And I want you to wind my hair so tight it makes my eyes pop out of my head."

Her maid gasped. "But why, Miss?"

"The man is old. Breath is vital to his health and it's important he maintain it. I would hate to be the reason the duke had heart palpitations."

Emily's dubious expression wavered slightly before she giggled. "Oh, Miss Catherine, what a sense of humor you have. His Grace made a wise decision when he invited you to his estate to continue his pursuit for your hand in marriage."

Catherine nodded, her heart sinking even lower. She wanted to be beautiful for a man she loved, not for an aging man she'd thought of as Uncle for most of her days. She wanted to live her life on her own terms. She was trapped.

"Thank you for your kind words," she muttered.

But she didn't want the duke to continue his pursuit. Why did he want to marry her? She was younger than his sons, for goodness sake. And he'd treated her like his niece for the longest time.

The rattle of approaching carriages and the pounding of horses' hooves drifted through her bedchamber. She trudged to the opened window and peered out, the sharp wind buffeting her face. Three elegant vehicles with three outriders pulled to a stop in the circular drive.

"They're here," Emily cheered as she joined her. "I've never seen anything so grand in my life." She sighed. "You're a most fortunate lady."

Agony consumed Catherine. She was far from fortunate. For the rest of her life she would be married to a man she'd never be able to love as a husband.

"Miss?" Emily leaned near the window. "Who are those men dismounting?"

Catherine placed a hand over her fierce heartbeat and focused on the three broad-shouldered men striding to the front door. It'd been quite a while since she'd last seen them.

In particular, the eldest. From when she was a young girl, she'd yearned for his affection. Her mother had shredded her dream apart by informing her men with titles do not marry commoners. Because Grant had been married before, this situation was different.

"They're the duke's sons."

Emily stretched her neck, looking closer. "Where's His Grace?"

Catherine shrugged, turning away from the window. "Perhaps he's waiting in the carriage."

The bedroom door opened and Catherine's father stepped in. Once again, her mixed emotions stirred to life. Why hadn't her parents put a stop to this four years ago? Just because her father was vicar to the parish Grant attended and her father and he had grown close, didn't mean they had to agree to the betrothal. Even now she couldn't believe her father hadn't called down hell and fire from one of his own sermons for Grant's method of practically buying her since he'd paid for her schooling and most of her clothes.

"Are you ready?" her father asked, his voice and manner too soft to be a stern vicar.

Catherine gave him a sharp nod then turned away. She hadn't spoken to her parents since they'd sent her away to the girls' school. Even at her mother's funeral two years ago she'd barely said a word. Of course, the sudden death, and the way her mother had been killed still left a heavy scab on her heart. If only she could remember that night.

Pushing aside the horrid memory, she walked over to the empty vanity table. Her hair ribbons and brushes had been



packed in a trunk with all her other belongings. A sense of emptiness filled her. She longed for the way her life used to be, before Grant had decided to have her as his wife. It hurt to know she couldn't force herself to love him that way, even after everything he'd done for her.

"Emily?" Henry Martin asked. "Would you see if Mrs. Berkley is packed and ready to travel with my daughter?"

"Yes, sir." Emily bobbed her head and left the room.

Strong footsteps grew on the floor behind Catherine, then his hands rested on her shoulders. She stiffened, refusing to give her father any affection. He hadn't been any comfort since her mother's death anyway.

"They're here, Cat."

Catherine cringed upon hearing the nickname her parents used when she was a child. She acknowledged him with another nod.

"Please turn and look at me." Her father's voice begged. "Would you at least say something?"

Catherine squeezed her eyes closed, willing the tears to stay hidden.

"Cat, please. Don't do this to me, or to yourself." He stroked his hand over the netting covering Catherine's hair. "Dearest? Don't you understand why your mother and I did this for you? His Grace has so much he wants to give you, and arranging your marriage was the only acceptable way. You'll have so much more than your mother or I had when we started out. You'll be blessed with a large house and many servants, not to mention the wonderful social life with many

titled lords and ladies. Just think of the life His Grace is offering."

Catherine had held her tongue for too long, and her resistance finally broke. Spinning around, she faced her father, her hands clenched into fists by her sides. "Haven't you always preached worldly possessions weren't important in life? Father, I'm appalled you're going through with this. I'm your only child. Am I not important? Do my feelings mean nothing?"

She took a deep, cleansing breath. "If you cared at all, you'd have realized I shared the dreams of every young girl. We come from a different world than the Duke of Havenwood, and I don't fit with his circle of associates. I want to fall in love with a man of my choosing—a man I can accept as my husband, who'll love and want me just as much as I love and want him."

A tear ran down her cheek, but she refused to wipe it away. "Why Grant Fielding? Especially when I used to think of him as an uncle."

Her chest heaved rapidly, but she wouldn't stop. Not now. "My dreams were snatched away when you and Mother decided Grant Fielding would be my husband. You've torn my life apart, so how can you expect me to be happy? Do you think I should fall to the floor and kiss your feet for finding me a wealthy husband just because he can give me everything *you* ever wanted?"

The volume of Catherine's voice rose while tears streaked down her cheeks. "Let me ask you, Father, am I going to stay

with Grant Fielding because you care about my welfare or because I'll have the life you wished for?"

Tears filled her father's eyes, but his jaw hardened. "Catherine Elizabeth Martin." His stern voice reminded her of being a young girl who'd been disobedient. "Show more respect for your father. I do *not* deserve to be spoken to in that manner."

"And I have no desire for such an arrangement."

He huffed and folded his arms. "It appears to me you've taken on your mother's personality. That's not a good thing, since insanity runs in her side of the family."

*Not again!* He'd always thrown that line at her whenever she spoke out of turn, which wasn't often.

She pushed past her father and fled the bedroom, heading down the long hallway to peer out another window. Her father's retreating footsteps eased her nerves only slightly. At least he didn't try to stop and scold her again.

She detested the thought of the future her parents had planned for her, but she must put her past behind her and start anew. She had no other choice.

Voices carried up the stairs, and she turned and leaned to hear more. Only mumbling could be heard this far away, so she crept closer to the stairs. Stopping, she wiped her eyes and took a deep breath for courage. She couldn't let them see how upset she was. She had to appear strong. Hurting Grant's family was unnecessary. Because of all they'd done for her and her parents, she must show them she accepted her fate in life, although her love for Grant wouldn't change into passion.

As her body and mind relaxed, the conversation her father had with the Duke's sons drifted up the staircase.

Henry Martin cleared his throat. "Might I inquire to the reason His Grace didn't come to retrieve my daughter?"

"My father has taken ill." A man's deep voice answered in an irritated tone.

"That's terrible. May I offer my services in some way?"

"Regretfully, Mr. Martin, there's naught my father will have anyone do." Another man's voice spoke, light and uplifting. "As I'm certain you know, he doesn't ask for help even if he needs it."

"Is he so ill he needs help?"

"My father is strong. His malady will soon pass," the aggravated man spoke again. "Mr. Martin, we're on a tight schedule. Could you please instruct your daughter to make haste?"

Catherine inhaled sharply. This was her cue to walk down the stairs. She smoothed out the front of her dress, and with a straight back, continued down to meet the men who would soon be a part of her uncertain future. The clicking of her low heels made everyone's head turn. She stared at the agitated eyes of her father. He probably thought she walked with the devil himself right now because of the temper she'd displayed a few moments before.

She forced herself to smile. "Please forgive me for making you wait, gentlemen."

Just like she'd been taught in the finishing school, she floated as gracefully as she could over to her father and stopped. Keeping her expression controlled, she allowed her

gaze to move to the three other men. The years had been extremely kind to the awkward boys she remembered briefly from her childhood, especially to Nicholas. Her breathing quickened.

Right away, she'd found the man who'd spoken so bitterly and she sucked in a breath. Although very handsome, his expression appeared as dark as his hair. Why was Nick acting so hateful?

"Catherine, dear," her father began, taking hold of her cold hand. "I believe you remember His Grace's sons."

He pointed to the man closest to them. "This is the Duke of Havenwood's eldest son, the Marquis of Castledale, Lord Nicholas Fielding."

An angry crease marred his broad forehead. Her heart hammered faster. Nicholas' dark brown hair waved as if he'd just finished running his fingers through the thickness. The royal blue eyes she'd remembered from her youth had turned black with his frown. He appeared as displeased with the situation as she felt.

Her smile faltered and she curtsied. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance again, my lord."

He nodded.

Her father continued, motioning his hand to the man beside the Marquis. "And this is Lord Fielding, the second son, Lord Gregg."

Once again she curtsied. "Good day."

Lord Gregg smiled. His charming grin made her want to giggle, so she bit her cheek. His brown hair was almost as dark as his older brother's, and his blue eyes twinkled. And

just like his brother, his brawny build gave evidence of his superb strength.

"Enchanted, I'm sure," Gregg said.

"And this," her father continued, "is Lord Fielding, the youngest. Lord Ian."

This man was handsome. His dusty-blond hair and brown eyes added to his boyish appearance, and his cheerful countenance gave her hope of becoming his friend.

She smiled and curtsied. "Good day."

When she raised her gaze to his, a light of interest sparked in his eyes that made her want to giggle. Just like with his brother, Gregg, she resisted.

"Pleased to meet you, once again," he said.

Nicholas took a step forward and cleared his throat. "We have no time for this. Are you packed, Miss Martin? If so, our footmen will load your trunks."

Catherine's gut twisted. What had she done to make him so irate? She sent him a fake smile, squeezing her hands into fists. "Yes, my lord. I'll instruct my maid to inform your servants." She turned and gracefully walked out of the room.

Once inside the hallway and out of view, she stopped and flattened her back against the wall. Placing her hand over her rapidly beating heart, she sighed. She'd definitely have to watch herself before she ended up revealing how she really felt. Besides, it was too late to have feelings for Nicholas since she would soon be wed to his father.

From the other room, her father spoke. "Lord Castledale, pardon me for being candid, but why are you so hostile toward my daughter? She's the future Duchess of Havenwood

and I would ask that you treat her with the respect befitting her station."

"Yes, I comprehend her place in my father's household." The Marquis' voice escalated. "Please accept my apologies for being so forthright, but I'm on a tight schedule and I have need to depart posthaste. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll wait outside."

Heavy footsteps reverberated toward the front door, followed by the door slamming. Catherine closed her eyes and groaned. Why did her father have to add coal to the already stoked fire?

After informing her maid she wished to leave, Catherine hurried to her bedroom and made certain she'd not overlooked anything of importance during the packing. The emptiness of the room brought a hollow ache to her chest, but she refused to cry. This was the end of her youth, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Not long ago, she'd lost control in front of her father, but she'd vowed never to do so again. She may not like the life her parents chose for her, but she'd make the best of an unwanted situation. If she had to live a life with a man she didn't love, at least she could make friends with his sons and have them as companions. Even though her future looked bleak, perhaps all was not lost.

Closing the door on her past, she proceeded down the back staircase. It would be time to leave soon, and she didn't want *that man* any angrier. She didn't know if she'd be able to hold her tongue. And God forbid she'd be scolded by her companion, Mrs. Berkley, for not acting like a lady.

When she stepped outside, the warm summer breeze blew against her hot cheeks, and she lifted her face to the wind. Breathing deeply, she took in the fresh air, memorizing for the last time the scents of her country home—fresh hay, spring flowers, and homemade soap. She'd miss this place and her childhood friends. She'd turn her future into a quest—and an adventure it would be with the very irritated Lord Castledale to contend with.

As she neared the coaches, she gasped, her hand flying to her throat. All three were immaculately grand, but it was the vehicle in the lead that drew her attention. Pulled by six identical white horses with gray harnesses, the body of the coach glazed in shiny black with the duke's coat of arms painted on the door panel. The footmen loading her trunks were impeccably dressed. Each wore black breeches with blue-striped waistcoats and matching topcoats decorated with gold buttons. With their shiny black boots, white shirts and gloves, she would feel like royalty traveling with them.

As she passed the nearest coach, the two footmen stopped and smiled wide, bobbing their heads in unison. "Greetings, Miss."

"Good day to you," she replied, and moved on to the next coach.

The last of the trunks were being stuffed inside, so she hurried to the third—the most amazing coach of all. She meandered around the vehicle. The magnificence nearly took her breath away.

As she turned, she came face-to-face with the one man she wanted to avoid. She inhaled sharply. As before, Nicholas'



blue eyes were tinted black. His drawn face and tight lips caused her to shudder. Although his overpowering presence made her heart flounder and her legs shake, she held her body firm. Childhood emotions came crashing back. But she must bury those feelings.

He arched one of his eyebrows. "Are you so eager to wed you're willing to leave Hereford without saying farewell to your father?"

"We've said our good-byes."

"That's correct. I heard."

Her eyes widened. "You did?"

"I couldn't hear the words, just the tone of your voice. You have a strong voice for such a petite woman. I must say, you're nothing like the child I remembered."

Her cheeks burned. Instead of defending herself as was her first reaction, she stubbornly lifted her chin, challenging him with her gaze. "And you're certainly not what I remembered either."

A grin touched his lips. He crossed his arms over his wide chest. "What's this? No tears?" He chuckled. "Are you that eager to leave a loving and secure home to enter an unfamiliar one?"

She stiffened her spine. "Yes, I'm ready to start my new life."

His gaze swept over her body again and an inner shiver ran through her. He turned his head and peered across the meager land she called home, over the two-story whitewashed cottage where she'd lived all her life. Before her death, her mother had kept the place looking lovely with

fresh flowers, adding a little color to the scenery. Trees and bushes were trimmed and quite green for this time of year. Obviously by the Marquis' upturned nose, he didn't think much of her home.

He nodded. "I can see why you'd be eager." Suddenly, the grin left, replaced with a scowl. "And I'll wager you cannot wait to start spending my father's money."

Her palms itched to slap the all-too-arrogant attitude right off his face, but she refrained. She balled her hands in the folds of her dress. "You can believe whatever you wish." She stepped toward the coach. "I also believe we're not going to get along well, so it will make this trip more pleasant if we avoided each other."

She raised her skirts to step inside the vehicle, and he grasped her elbow to help her. Once inside, she yanked her arm out of his clutches. "And I do *not* need your assistance."

The corner of his mouth lifted in an annoying grin, and she clutched her gown to keep from reverting back to her tomboy ways and punching him in the nose.

"Yes, Miss Martin," he sarcastically replied. "As you wish." Lines of anger creased his forehead before he swung around and stalked away.

She took a deep breath and tried to slow her pounding heart. Her eyes stung from unshed tears, but she quickly blinked them away.

Hearing voices from the house, she straightened. She didn't want anyone to know how upset the Marquis had made her. Emily and Mrs. Berkley ascended Catherine's coach and took the seat in front of her.

"Oh, is this not exciting?" Emily bubbled.

Catherine's companion huffed and lifted her stubby nose, her attention moving to the window. The older woman twined her pudgy fingers together in her lap. Catherine's father stuck his head inside.

"Well, daughter, are you ready to depart?"

She nodded and pursed her lips.

"Splendid. I know you're upset with me, but I've arranged this for your future happiness. His Grace is a caring man, you'll see."

She gave her father another nod, her heart wrenching, making it hard to breathe.

"I do love you very much whether you want to believe it or not." Henry reached out and squeezed her hands resting in her lap. Hanging his head, he backed out of the coach and disappeared.

Before Catherine could wipe the scowl off her face, Gregg poked his head inside, a charming sparkle lighting his eyes. His smile made her relax and she grinned.

"We'll start off now. Do you need anything before we leave, Miss Martin?"

She shook her head. "Considering what our relationship will be within a month, I think it will be appropriate to call me Catherine."

"I'd like that." He winked. "I'd definitely like to be your friend."

"That would please me, too."

"Splendid. Then shall we depart? If you need anything, just tap on the roof and the driver will stop."

"Thank you, Lord Gregg."

His grin widened. "Just call me Gregg." He pulled away from the door and closed it. A few minutes later, the coach lurched forward and the small caravan was on its way.

"I do like Lord Gregg," Emily remarked after about ten minutes of silence. "Both he and his younger brother seem very pleasant."

Snapping out of her thoughts, Catherine focused on the conversation. "Yes. I too noticed how charming they are. Besides their height and physique, they really haven't changed. When I was nine years of age, their father would bring them to visit once a month."

She smiled. The boys hadn't liked her at first because of her gender, but when she'd shown them she could ride a horse just as well and as fast as they could, they had softened. That's when she began having silly little flutters in her stomach whenever Nicholas looked at her. She used to dream of growing and maturing enough for him to fall in love with her. Now she knew how idiotic her fantasy had been.

Catherine's smile disappeared. "Many things have changed since then. I'm not the tomboy I used to be."

Mrs. Berkley turned toward her. "And you must remember that. It's a good thing His Grace sent you to school to reform your ways. You're not to ever look back. From this day forward you'll act like the proper young lady."

Catherine released an irritated sigh and relaxed against the seat. "Yes, Mrs. Berkley. I'll become the proper young lady the girls' school taught me to be." Hopefully, Gregg and Ian would be her friends and help her to adjust.

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But not the Marquis. Definitely not that man.

## **Two**

Nicholas kicked his heels into the horse's belly and urged the animal forward, eager for this trip to be over. Despite the perfect weather, he was tired of this journey and his patience had been worn to a frazzle. Since their departure from the Martin's cottage, he'd ignored his brothers and was content to exist in his own world; a world where he tried not to feel the pain of his breaking heart.

Keeping a straight back, he led the group of travelers toward his family's estate. But if anyone could see what images ran through his mind, they'd believe he was the worst lord in the realm.

May the devil take him for his thoughts, for Satan must surely be meddling in his life. How could fate be so unkind? The very girl he'd secretly loved as a lad would soon marry his father! Curse the Gods who'd played this cruel hoax on him.

Five years ago he'd realized his feelings for Catherine, but knew neither of them were old enough to act upon them. Time would develop both him and Catherine into mature adults, which was what he waited for. As children, he'd enjoyed being around her. She made him laugh and he took pleasure in the way his heart leapt whenever they were together.

He'd waited all these years to proclaim his feelings ... only to have his father yank them from him and crush them with his heel. True, he realized back when he was younger that she wouldn't be the woman his father and society would want

him to marry because her father didn't have a title, but Nick decided long ago he would marry for love—not money. Once again, his dream was taken from under him and squashed.

He shifted in his saddle, his gut clenching as a numbing chill covered his body. How could he allow his father to marry the woman he once loved? The woman he *still* loved. Then again, how could he stop the older man's happiness ... especially when his days were numbered?

Nick had lied to Reverend Martin. His father wasn't just under the weather—he was dying.

Nick glanced over his shoulder at the coaches and shook his head. What possible reason could his father have for wanting a young wife anyway? His father must have known what Nick did five years ago—Catherine would turn into a real beauty.

As a young girl, she'd been quite ravishing. But the years had only enhanced her beauty. He'd literally lost his breath when she glided down the stairs, looking as regal as the women at court. He clenched his jaw. And damn if he couldn't do a thing about it now.

Although her stubbornness really didn't surprise him, the outburst of her temper was something unexpected. When she'd raised her voice against her father, her unhappiness had been obvious. But why? She was getting what all girls her age wanted—a wealthy, titled husband.

Sighing heavily, he rearranged the reins in his hands. His father was going ahead with this ludicrous arrangement even though he was extremely sick. Each day his father grew more ill, withering away before Nick's eyes. Grant's eyesight had

diminished also, and Nick had to practically stand right in front of him to be seen.

From behind, Gregg called his name. "Hold up, Nick. What's your hurry?"

Nick slowed his horse until his brothers caught up. "My mind wandered," he explained. "I didn't realize I'd ridden so far ahead."

"It's around the lunch hour," Ian said. "What do you say we find a nice little inn and feed our bellies? I didn't get to eat breakfast this morning because you were in such a hurry to get to the Martin's."

Nick chuckled. "Don't blame me for that. You were too occupied with the serving wench to eat. If you'd paid as much attention to your food as you did to that girl, you wouldn't be bellyaching right now."

Ian shrugged. "What can I say? The woman was interested in a quick tumble. Hell, Nick, it would've been bad manners to turn her away."

Nick nodded. "Yes, for you it would have been."

"Catherine is probably hungry, too," Gregg added. "And you know how women are when they get that way."

Nick lost his grin. Would he ever be able to hear her name without dying inside? And why couldn't he get rid of the hostility forming a knot in his chest?

"Yes. I know how women can be. I'll ride on ahead and locate an eating establishment."

With renewed anger, Nick urged his horse into a fast trot.

An hour later, Nick brought the group of travelers to an inn five miles south, just out of their way. It wasn't exactly the



kind of eating establishment he'd hoped for, but being this far out in the country, it was the best he could find. He'd previously paid the owner more than the working man made in a month to have a clean table ready, and warm, fresh food awaiting their arrival. He also strongly suggested they not water down the ale.

As he dismounted, his two brothers rushed to the main carriage to assist Catherine. He shook his head. Those two fawned over her as if she were royalty. Did they think their act of heroism would put them on their father's good side? Or maybe they found Catherine charming and attractive?

But of course. How could they not? She had a certain graceful beauty that tore him apart with longing every time he looked at her. Even now she looked very well, considering the bumpy ride. Still wound in a tight bun with black netting, her hair held together nicely. Excitement twinkled in her eyes as she focused on his brothers. Of course, she probably loved the way Gregg and Ian adored her, listening to her every word.

As the threesome walked his way, Nick grunted with disdain. Her eyes actually looked violet instead of the dark color they'd turned earlier this morning when they'd exchanged heated words in front of the carriage.

Gregg said something and she laughed. Nick mentally dismissed the pleasant music drifting to his ears. She was definitely trained the right way. There was no way his father wouldn't be sucked in by her charm just like his doltish brothers were right now.

Nick opened the door for the other three and couldn't stop his gaze from dipping to the front of her dress as she passed. The short-waist jacket emphasized her generous bosom and flattered her slim waist. The Devil take her. She was certainly well-developed for her age. Inwardly, he groaned.

He slid on the bench across the table from his brothers and Catherine who sat between them. With narrowed eyes, he studied her as she merrily conversed with Gregg and Ian. Every once in a while she'd glance at him, before turning her attention back upon his calf-eyed brothers.

Would he ever be able to erase her from his memory? Could he remove the feelings he once had—the dreams that had meant so much to him as a lad?

The food was served and the conversation mellowed. Although Nick could tell she remembered the manners taught to her in school, it was obvious his brothers forgot their upbringing. They talked with their mouths full and rested their elbows on the table.

Nick didn't enter the conversation at all and finished eating before the others. He scooted back in his chair and folded his arms, continuing to listen to the immature conversation Gregg and Ian kept rattling on about. Why was he being punished this way?

Before too long, something warm brushed against his elbow, and he looked up at the serving maid. He'd failed to notice her earlier, but now the wench looked at him with a spark of hot lust in her eyes. The quirky grin on her lips suggested she'd be willing to do almost anything he wanted—

for a price, of course. And since he'd never have his one true love...

"Is there anythin' else I can git ya, gov'na?"

Nick gave her one of his devastating smiles—the kind he'd been told would send a maid's heart fluttering out of control. Although he thought her speech needed improvement, she looked like she'd be quite pleasing between the sheets, as long as she didn't talk. She wasn't the shapeliest wench he'd met, but she was amongst the prettiest. Her dark blonde hair hung over her shoulders, giving her that familiar tumbled look. The baggy cream-colored blouse rode low on one shoulder, making her more alluring. Her skin was nice and white, just the way he liked. Yes, she'd do. She'd do quite nicely for now, as long as she took away his heartache and made him forget.

"I'd like another ale." He winked.

"Sure thing, gov'na." She hurried away and within minutes brought him another mug. She bent over and placed the drink in front of him, purposely displaying her ample endowments.

He leaned closer to take in his fill of her offering. Not bad at all. Just as he was ready to give her another grin, someone kicked his shin from underneath the table. Pain shot up his leg and he grimaced. The disapproving looks of his brothers made him pause. The bright red face of the woman sitting between them also reminded him who was in his company.  
*Damn.*

The loud huff from Mrs. Berkley sitting at the end of the table also let him know he'd be getting an ear boxing soon.

"Are you forgetting our guest?" Gregg asked sternly.

Nick shrugged. "Not at all."

"Then would you mind doing *that* with the wench in another time and place?"

The serving woman walked away, swishing her hips as she watched him over her shoulder. He withdrew his attention from her backside and glared across the table at Gregg.

"What troubles you?" Nick snapped. "Has our father's soon-to-be bride not been to an inn before? Am I hurting her tender sensibilities?"

Catherine's gaze didn't leave her food, but her face flamed brighter. She stirred her crust of bread around the plate. A small pang of regret began in his chest. He shouldn't have said it, but now it was too late. Curse his damaged heart.

"Nicholas," Gregg warned, "this is not the time."

Mrs. Berkley cleared her throat. "I believe this is *not* a proper subject, either, my lords."

Nick shifted his gaze from Gregg to Ian, who still gave condescending looks, then to the embarrassed girl who couldn't meet his eyes.

"Fine then," he snapped, pushing himself from the table. "If we're finished with our meals, I'm ready to leave." He stormed out of the inn, his heart crushing with each step.

\* \* \* \*

Catherine ran a shaky hand over her heated cheeks as she stared out the window of the carriage, waiting for Mrs. Berkley to join her. Her lady's companion had pulled Lord Castledale aside after they'd left the inn. She wished she could have heard what the older woman said.

Being in a school for four years had kept her innocent in some things, and she had no idea a man would receive such pleasure just by looking down a woman's blouse. For heaven's sake, what could a man possibly find interesting in breasts that were for the sole purpose of nursing? The idea was far beyond her imagination, yet when Nick's knee-melting grin appeared and a sparkle touched his blue eyes, a familiar flutter grew in her chest. The unmistakable look of pleasure on his face caused tingles in her body—those she remembered getting as a young girl whenever Nick was around. Just thinking about it now made her heartbeat take on a different rhythm, yet at the same time, her chest ached with sadness. Why couldn't she be marrying Nick instead?

Because she wasn't good enough to be the first wife of a soon-to-be duke.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. It was a good thing Nick didn't look at her as he'd done the serving woman. She'd never seen a man so blindly attractive in her life. Good thing he hadn't looked this way when he was younger. She would have made a fool out of herself.

When the carriage door opened, Mrs. Berkley climbed in, as did Gregg and Ian.

"Is something amiss?" she asked.

Gregg closed the door and tapped on the roof of the carriage. It lurched into motion. "No, nothing is amiss. My brother and I thought you might like some company for a little while. Your maid is in the baggage carriage."

She glanced at Mrs. Berkley who, although she didn't say anything, nodded her approval.

Catherine smiled. "This is a pleasant surprise."

"You know," Ian said, "it feels strange conversing with you on an adult level, and I feel myself at a loss for words. I feel I should challenge you to a horse race, or skip rocks with you at the lake."

She laughed. "I don't think there's anything wrong with talking about the past. In fact, I wouldn't mind it at all."

With a loud sigh, Ian relaxed in the seat across from her. "It relieves me to know the girls' school didn't change you into a prude like it does most women."

Confusion clouded her mind. "Was I supposed to change into a prude?"

"Yes," Gregg answered. "You were supposed to learn the proper ways to converse with the lords and ladies of the realm, along with planning a dinner party and the correct seating arrangements. You were required to learn all the tedious subjects men hate to discuss."

Beside her, Mrs. Berkley snorted and rolled her eyes.

Catherine couldn't stop the bubble of laughter springing from her chest. "The teachers at the school did try to teach me those things, but I found the subjects most boring."

Gregg and Ian joined together in hearty laughter.

She shrugged. "That's probably why I was a great disappointment to most of my teachers. Rarely did I receive praise."

Gregg leaned forward in his seat, his knees pushing against hers. "Were you a naughty little girl, Catherine?"

She smiled wider. "Let me just say I wasn't exactly the best pupil."

Mrs. Berkley glared. Catherine pretended she didn't see. Ian leaned forward. "Oh, do tell. What wicked things did you get away with?"

She bit her lip in hesitation. Would Mrs. Berkley stop her? Then again, although there was still a childhood bond with Gregg and Ian, she would soon marry their father. Perhaps they expected her to be well-trained in the area surrounding her soon-to-be new title.

"I fear," she began softly, "if I tell you everything, I might lose your respect."

"Catherine." Gregg patted her hands and smiled. "Can I let you in on a little secret?"

She nodded.

"You'll soon be a duchess, so you can pretty much carry on as you wish. The *haute ton* will kiss your feet, maybe even imitate you. Most of the ladies in London are uptight, and men like Ian and myself prefer them to be more open and relaxed like you seem to be. We would rather be with a woman who can make us laugh than one who sticks to the rules of propriety."

She softened her smile. "Thank you for telling me, Gregg. I certainly feel more comfortable disclosing my sordid childhood escapades now." She snapped her attention to the woman next to her. "As long as Mrs. Berkley doesn't disapprove."

A hint of a grin stretched on the older woman's face and she nodded. "Carry on."

Catherine let out a relieved sigh.

"So, Catherine, tell us what wild things you did in school," Ian urged.

"I had a normal experience, I think, but I had one friend whose reckless encouragement landed me into many tangles with the school authorities. Because of my background, the teachers looked down on me, yet I caught on just as quickly as the other girls. There was one teacher who belittled my friend and me. She'd called us both simpleminded twits. Liz and I decided not to take it lightly, so we planned our revenge."

Ian and Gregg sat forward on their seat, eagerness twinkling in their eyes. She smiled wider then continued. "Usually, the teacher prepared her lessons on the chalkboard ahead of time, so one day Liz and I arrived at the classroom early and changed everything the teacher had written on the board. It wasn't a drastic change, mind you, but we made it appear as if *she* were the simple-minded twit because of what we had written. In addition, we purposely misspelled a few words."

Both Gregg and Ian whooped with laughter, and it lightened her heart when even old Mrs. Berkley chuckled.

"It pleases me to see you have a mischievous side," Gregg said. "I'd hate to think the new member of our family had no sense of humor."

"Well, Gregg, I'm definitely not a prude."

He reached over and squeezed her hands. "Good. Ian and I will like you better for it. Hell, even Nick—" He broke off, his face going a shade darker. "I apologize, Catherine. I didn't mean to curse in front of you."

She laughed. "Not to worry, Gregg. I'm used to hearing the stable master at the school use that language, although



he thought nobody was listening. But now I catch myself on a few occasions letting an unladylike word slip out. Thankfully, I'm alone when this happens."

Both brothers laughed again, falling back on the seat and clutching their sides.

"Now you cannot tell anyone," she reminded.

"Oh no, Catherine," Ian promised. "This one will remain with us until our dying day."

She smiled. "Good. I'm blessed to have you as friends." She waited until they had stopped laughing, then asked, "Now tell me what kind of sordid pranksters were you?"

She sat back in her seat and listened as they each related a tale or two. She was also happy to know they weren't like the snobbish Englishmen she'd heard stories about. *Men like Nicholas*. Suddenly, the image of Nicholas with a look of desire on his face interrupted her thoughts and her heart picked up a different rhythm.

Dismissing the wayward images, she focused on the other brothers. "It sounds like your younger days were just as exciting as mine," she said, assuming that from Gregg's stories, Nick was not as entertaining as his brothers. She would enjoy the company of Gregg and Ian, but definitely not Nick. Just the thought sent silly ripples to her stomach and she folded her arms across her middle. Why did that man create such havoc in her body? And why was it not unpleasant?

\* \* \* \*

Shouts and laughter boomed from the carriage, and Nick cringed. His brothers made an obscene amount of noise, which meant they found their soon-to-be stepmother very amusing. Regret stabbed at him whenever he heard the musical sounds of merriment, and at times he wished he could join them. But he couldn't. He was the eldest and had to take charge. Somebody needed to keep this caravan going. It fell upon his shoulders, as it always would, especially once his father died.

Nick wasn't worried about stepping into his father's position in the House of the Lords, but he doubted he could handle the position with as much skill as Grant had. Could he contain his out-of-control brothers? Could Nick keep them from gambling away their allowances?

He chuckled to himself. What was he thinking? His father was a great businessman and had tripled the family fortune since Nick was a small lad. Grant had taught Nick well, and he was confident he could continue to build his inheritance.

But what about after his father died? Nick lost his grin. Where would Catherine live? Nick certainly didn't want her living in the same house with him and his randy brothers. What a scandal that would make. It wouldn't matter to society if she were their stepmother. Catherine's young age and beauty overrode that. Yet, he couldn't toss her out of their country estate and send her to the Dower house. Grant would be disappointed if he did that.

And for Nick's own well being he couldn't have her that close knowing he couldn't have her although she was within his grasp.

A commotion behind him pulled him from his thoughts, and he turned. The carriage stopped and his brothers climbed out. This would be a good time to have a talk with Catherine to tell her of his father's condition. Of course, he'd have to pretend her nearness didn't set his body on fire.

He pulled his horse around and over to the coach and dismounted. He ignored the drawn brows from his brothers, and tossed one of the footmen the reins. Nick walked over to the carriage and peered inside. Once Catherine saw him, her cheeks darkened. His presence must still rattle her—they were evenly matched then.

"Good afternoon," he greeted nicely, determined to be pleasant and not come across as a love-smitten young pup. "Is it permissible to ride with you for a spell? It's most important we discuss some things before we reach home."

She nodded.

He climbed in and sat on the seat across from her. Mrs. Berkley gave him a curt nod, then turned and looked out the window.

For the first few moments, silence crackled through the air as he searched for the words to say. Catherine squirmed in her seat, then straightened her back and lifted her chin.

She cleared her throat. "Are we almost to Oxford then?"

He cringed, trying to ignore the heavenly lift of her voice. "We'll arrive at Havenwood Estate first thing in the morning."

Her eyebrows drew together. "Do you plan on traveling through the night?"

"No, Catherine. There are too many highwaymen in the middle of the night ready to nab wealthy people, and I don't plan on giving them that opportunity. We'll stop at an inn."

"Oh."

"Catherine, the reason I need to talk with you is because I feel it's my responsibility to inform you about my father." He paused briefly then continued. "Has anyone told you he's ill?"

She nodded. "Gregg and Ian mentioned he's been under the weather lately, which is the reason he couldn't come for me himself."

"Unfortunately, it's more serious. I don't think Gregg or Ian know exactly how ill our father is."

"How serious is he?"

Nick pushed his fingers through the thickness of his hair and relaxed against the seat, meeting her big, questioning violet eyes. "My father is dying." She sucked in her breath. Even Mrs. Berkley snapped her head his way.

He continued. "Father has been sick for the past year, and his health is slowly declining. Lately, he's been so gravely ill he's needed the constant care of his valet."

"Why?" Her voice broke.

"For some reason, the disease is slowly taking away his sight."

Her hands trembled so she clutched them together and held them against her stomach. "How long ... how long..."

"I don't know and neither do the physicians."

She shook her head. "But if he's dying, then why ... why does he still want to marry me?"

He shrugged. "I cannot answer that. Father realizes he's dying, but he'll not listen to me. I've tried to get him to see the situation he's placing you in, but he refuses to listen. He says he wants his last days to be shared with a beautiful woman who will make him happy."

An ashen color crept over her cheeks and her eyes grew wide.

His heart clenched. She did care about his father. What an ass he'd been to assume otherwise. His father had spoiled her as a young girl, even sent her to the best finishing school England had to offer.

He scolded his previous menacing thoughts. Time to think about his father's dying wish instead of his own greedy lust.

"Catherine, might I ask you a personal question?"

"Yes."

"I've already mentioned I could hear your voice raised in anger when I first arrived at your cottage."

The color moved to cover the rest of her face, going a shade darker.

"Although I couldn't hear every word, I received the impression you weren't pleased with something."

Mrs. Berkley straightened and cleared her throat. He really wished she would leave, but it was only proper for her to be here. Catherine glanced at the older woman before meeting his eyes.

"Yes." Her voice softened.

"What are your feelings in regards to marrying my father?"

She lowered her gaze as she grasped her hands so tight her knuckles turned white. "I'm extremely disappointed to think my parents arranged my intended marriage."

His heart leapt, but he focused on what he needed to ask.

He nodded. "As I'm certain you have surmised, I also disapprove of my father's forthcoming nuptials. But I'm trying not to ponder those feelings right now. I need to know if you'd put your fears and anger aside and make my father happy in his final days."

He snapped his mouth closed. What had he just asked? Did he really mean that? But as much as he disliked seeing the girl of his childhood dreams marry his father, Grant Fielding's happiness was most important.

"I ... I ... I was led to believe that my visit would be to see if your father and I suited."

"Yes, I know, but if the marriage takes place, will you then try to make him happy? I remember several years back when we'd come to visit and he'd bring you gifts. Just seeing your smile brightened his day."

Tears formed in her eyes and her jaw tightened. Around her quivering rosebud lips, a white line appeared.

"Yes, my lord. I will try my best to please him." Her voice shook.

Nick sighed heavily and squeezed her clasped hands. "Thank you, Catherine."

"Lord Castledale? May I ask you something of a personal nature?"

Wary about her request, he slowly nodded. "Proceed."

"I know I've done something to upset you, but for your father's sake can you at least try and be civil toward me? Can you not look at me without scowling?"

He snatched his hand away. He couldn't promise that. Hiding his hurt behind anger was the only way to mask his feelings. "It's irrelevant how I look at you. My father will probably not even see."

"No, but he'll notice a change in the way I act around you, and he'll most certainly wonder why."

Nick huffed and glanced out the window, hoping she'd end the subject. If she only knew...

"Please?" she continued. "Your brothers don't seem to have a problem with being my friend, so why not you? If only for appearance sake?"

After a few awkward moments, Nick turned and met her stare. Her eyes were wide and pleading. Why in the hell was he going to give in? And why was his heart softening the longer he looked into those deep pools of emotion? "Very well, I will. But mind you, it'll only happen in front of my father."

She smiled—genuinely smiled, and the wall of ice he'd constructed around his heart cracked a little. Her tender smile was just as pretty as her eyes at this moment. Even though she made a lovely picture—which he could lose himself in—discomfort settled within him. Suddenly the coach became extremely small and cramped. Damn him for not having better control.

"Yes ... well ... um, now that we have that settled, I'll leave."

Always, My Love  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

He tapped twice on the roof of the carriage and it jerked to a stop. Without another word, he climbed outside and mounted his horse. Kicking the animal into action, he tried to rid himself of the confusing feeling he'd just experienced, and somehow recover his anger.



### **Three**

The sun disappeared under the horizon and darkness blanketed the earth. Nick led his caravan to an inn where he'd previously arranged for them to stay. At this establishment, the food tasted better, the people were dressed a little nicer, and the floors were swept clean. More than one serving wench raised her brow at him and shot him a heady grin, but that wasn't unusual for him. But he was now more cautious about how he acted in front of the young woman who traveled with him. How could he forget how innocent she was? Catherine sat across the table from him, keeping his brothers' attention in the palm of her hand.

Nick twirled his spoon around the stew in his bowl, listening to the conversation at the table as he kept a close eye on Catherine's reactions. Every time she smiled and laughed, a beautiful sparkle lit her violet eyes. Caught unawares, his stomach flip-flopped. When his gaze dropped to her heart-shaped, raspberry colored lips, he questioned his wandering mind—especially when it left her mouth and rested on her full bosom. She had the perfect chest, and even though her dress didn't show a hint of skin, it molded to her curves, making him want to glance underneath to see if she was all real.

He shook away his lustful thoughts. Watching her this way would only make him insane. He couldn't torture himself like this.

Tearing his eyes away from Catherine, he looked upon the serving wench who brought another plate of bread to the

table. He gave the woman one of those smiles that stopped maids in their tracks. The wench's lips pulled into a sly grin, and she winked at him before leaving. He didn't look down her blouse as he'd done to the serving girl at the previous inn, yet had the brief contact between them in any way affected his soon-to-be stepmother?

From across the table, he found her gaze on him. A slight blush stained her cheeks. Once their eyes connected, a deeper color spread across her face and neck. She quickly looked down at the plate of meats and cheeses and picked up a slice of beef.

He grinned and brought his drink to his mouth to hide it. Catherine really was a pure innocent little thing. He hadn't even touched the serving girl, but to Catherine it was as if he'd ripped the woman's clothes right off her body and devoured her in front of everybody.

He glanced at the wench who now stood by the bar. Quite comely and well proportioned, she looked to be very interested in him. He was due for a quick toss in the sheets, and this might be his fortunate night ... if he could forget about Catherine.

"Nick?" Gregg asked. Nick dragged his attention to his brother. "We are going to escort Catherine and Mrs. Berkley to their rooms. Would you care to join us?"

Nick threw a quick glance at the serving woman, then back to his brother. "No, I think I'll stay here." He shifted his attention to Catherine who still had a pink tint on her cheeks. "Good evening, Catherine. I hope your bedchamber will be suitable tonight."

She nodded. "I'm certain it'll be most accommodating, thank you."

\* \* \* \*

Catherine moved away from the table and toward the stairs with Gregg and Ian by her side. She took her time, mainly so she could watch Nick a little longer. The serving woman rushed to Nick's side. He smiled and slid his arm around her waist.

Once again, the beat of Catherine's heart knocked out of control. How could she stop reacting to Nick's smile? Could she ever forget the fantasies she'd had about him as a young girl?

She tried her hardest to keep her thoughts centered on Gregg and Ian as they walked her to her room, but the longer she thought of Nick's smile, the fluttering in her stomach multiplied. The devil take him. Why did he have to be so heart-stoppingly handsome? Why couldn't he just keep his dark scowl all the time? It'd be much easier for her to restrain her fiercely beating heart and sweaty palms if he were always mean.

After Gregg and Ian left, Emily helped Catherine change into her nightclothes. When she crawled into bed, her mind strayed to Nick's devastating smile, but she forced it onto her future husband instead.

Was Grant really dying and going blind? The news upset her, but she mainly mourned for herself than for Grant. Why did she have to marry a man who was going to die? Of course, in a way, this was good news. That meant she

wouldn't be married to him for very long before he left this world to meet his maker.

She pushed the heels of her hands against her eyes and groaned. She shouldn't have thought that. Thinking of Grant right now and how to make his last days those of happiness were of utmost importance. It would be hard, but she must do this. She owed it to Grant. He'd always been a wonderful and generous friend to her and her parents, and it was her turn to pay him back.

Catherine relaxed against the feather-down pillow and closed her eyes. The lumpy bed caused discomfort to her back, but she could sleep on anything. As the daughter of a vicar she had been trained to adjust to any kind of bed since they traveled a lot in her younger years.

Many things had been different in her youth. Since her mother's death, her father had been stricter—and always leery. He suspected her of killing her mother, and the thought pierced through her heart even deeper. She hadn't remembered that night, but his accusing stare always caused her self-doubt. Insanity ran in her mother's side of the family, he'd kept reminding her. Perhaps that's why she didn't recall hearing anything that awful night.

Father had been away teaching a sermon in the neighboring county, and she had stayed home to take care of her ill mother. She'd gone to bed like she always did, but when she awoke, something was different. When she walked out of her room it was as if she were passing through a different house. Dishes were broken and scattered all over the kitchen floor. The padding from the sofa had been ripped

and strewn across the floor. And on the floor by the fireplace ... her mother lay dead. The poker rested beside her head with blood still on the tip. Her mother's head split open as crimson stained the carpet beneath her.

Catherine shook the nightmare from her mind, turned on her side and willed herself to sleep. She must think of more pleasant things ... things like how a pair of intoxicating royal blue eyes looked at her in a heat-filled stare, exactly the way they'd gazed upon the serving woman not too long ago.

\* \* \* \*

Accepting Gregg's hand, Catherine climbed down the steps of the carriage and gazed upon the house where she would be living as Grant's wife. Its grandeur held her in awe. The grounds and the house itself were much larger than she remembered as a child. Carved gray stone held together the two-story mansion. A balcony on the second landing seemed to wrap all the way around the house. Certainly different from the other houses they'd passed. A butler opened the double doors for her, bowing slightly as she entered.

Then she saw *him*—the Duke of Havenwood. Grant stood just inside the first of many rooms that lined the large hallway. Bits and pieces of him still remained in her memory, but the man before her now was nothing like what she remembered. Older. Frailer. Although tall as Nick, the Duke's body stooped slightly as he rested on his cane for support. The years had taken away Grant's thick black hair, replacing it with a thinner patch of prominent silver. His eyes bothered

her the most. In her memory, they were deep pools of ocean blue, but not now. These were paler ... sicker.

This was wrong. All of it. Suddenly, the stress of everything consumed her, suffocating her. She couldn't breathe, and if she didn't do something soon, she'd become sick all over the floor. Perhaps even swoon. Taking a quick glance behind her, she paused. She wanted to turn and run, get far away from here. She didn't want to go through with any of this; didn't want to be married to a sick old man whom she'd have to nurse until his dying day. Didn't want the responsibility of such a grand mansion with multitudes of servants, and especially, she didn't want to be the stepmother to three men who were all older than her eighteen years.

On shaky legs she took a step back to flee, but a strong, warm hand grasped her elbow and stopped her from flight. She looked into the smiling eyes of Nick, and nearly melted under his handsome stare. He smiled now only because of their agreement, but somehow it made her strong again. His expression eliminated all of her doubts, his warm eyes giving her the courage she needed to stay.

"Catherine, my dear?" Havenwood spoke loudly. "Come closer and let me look upon your loveliness."

Nick kept his grip on her elbow and helped her over to stand in front of his father. "Here is Catherine, Father," he said. "Delivered to you safe and sound as promised."

Grant smiled, his whole face brightening. "Oh, Catherine, you're absolutely beautiful. Your very presence lights my house." Reaching out, he took hold of her hand and brought it

to his lips, kissing her knuckles. "Did you have a pleasant trip? Was everything to your liking?"

She smiled. "Yes, thank you very much, Your Grace."

"No, no, my darling little one. When it's just us, please call me Grant."

She nodded. "As you wish."

Mrs. Berkley hovered behind her like a mother hen and Catherine wished everyone would go away. Grant squinted in the older woman's direction, then smiled. "And it's nice to see you again, Mrs. Berkley. I assume you have been taking good care of Miss Catherine for me?"

The lady's companion nodded. "Yes, Your Grace. I haven't let her out of my sight this whole trip."

"I commend you on a job well done." Grant turned and placed Catherine's hand in the crook of his elbow and led her into the drawing room. Nick and the others followed.

"Would you like anything to drink, my dear?" Grant asked.

Catherine swallowed the knot of fear down her dry throat, and although she should accept, the only thing she wanted to do right now was to be shown to her room. "No, thank you."

He led her to a sofa and let her sit, then settled beside her. He motioned to the servant hovering near. "I'd like my usual." Turning back to Catherine, he took her hands again. "I hope you don't mind, but I've arranged a ball to introduce you into society."

She nodded.

"Even if it's tonight?"

She widened her eyes, but kept her smile although her heart sank. "Tonight is fine."

"We still have several hours before the ball. Would you like to rest a spell and freshen up?"

*It's about time!* "Yes, I'd like that very much."

Grant looked up at Nick. "Son? Would you be so kind as to escort Catherine and Mrs. Berkley up to their chambers?"

\* \* \* \*

Inwardly Nick cringed. He figured this would happen. Since his father couldn't see to her needs, Grant left it to Nick. He abruptly set down the glass of sherry the butler had just handed him.

"Yes, Father," he replied, his tone clipped. He moved and took Catherine's hand to help her stand. Grant reached out and stopped them and pressed a chaste kiss to her cheek.

"It thrills me to have you here," Grant said.

"Yes ... um, me too," she mumbled.

The smile Catherine gave his father was forced. Her lips were too tight, and she looked to be gritting her teeth.

Once they started up the staircase, Nick let go of her arm. Mrs. Berkley followed closely. He didn't say a word until he opened the double doors to her bedchambers. "Catherine, these are your rooms," he announced.

She walked in, her eyes growing wide. It appeared as if his father had overspent on her account. Red and gold decor abounded throughout the room, and dashes of green and mauve gave it an elegant appearance. The drapes on the windows were thick, and the carpet plush. The large bed stood against the far wall, and the sheer drapes hung around it, cascading to the floor. She gasped. Nick thought the whole



setup looked like the Sultan's harem he'd seen earlier this year in his travels abroad.

"Are you pleased?" he asked.

She nodded but didn't meet his stare. "Your father has gone out of his way to make me happy." Her voice was low.

Nick turned to the older woman. "And your chambers are through here." He walked out of Catherine's room and across the hall, opening another pair of doors for Catherine's companion. Although not as lavish, Mrs. Berkley was still treated well.

The older woman thanked him and he left. With each step away from the rooms, his chest tightened, as did his fists. It wasn't proper, but he needed to speak to Catherine alone. He needed to find out what the hell had almost happened downstairs. Had she tried to flee? Would she do it again? What happened to the bargain they'd made in the coach?

Turning sharply, he walked back to her room. He knocked softly as to not alert Mrs. Berkley. Catherine opened the door and her eyes widened. He put his finger to his lips to hush her, stepped into the room and closed the door.

He grabbed her arm and she gasped. "I seriously hope you won't take leave of your senses again and try to run. I saw the fear in your eyes earlier, and I'm relieved I was able to stop you from escaping. I'm also thankful my father didn't see your panic. Don't let it happen again."

She winced. Her bottom lip quivered, but her eyes remained dry. "Do you think this is easy for me? I can assure you it's not, my lord. I'm truly sorry I had a moment of weakness, but the truth is I'm frightened to death. I have no

idea what to expect from this whole situation, but what scares me is the thought of sharing—" she paused and shivered, then continued with a shaky voice, "—intimacies with a man who is as old as my father."

Tears broke through the dam in her eyes and streamed down her cheeks. "When your father first kissed me at age fourteen, I was disgusted by the feeling of his lips on mine, and I'm scared when he kisses me again, it will provoke the same feelings I once had. I know I promised I'd try and make him happy, but I'm just so ... terrified of everything."

Sobs poured from her as she continued in a hysterical voice. "I really don't know why I tell you this. What does it matter to you? It's not as if you care." She covered her face with her hands.

Nick stood frozen. The control he'd seen her exert during their trip home had completely abandoned her. He really should give her a good talking to, but right now as she cried, the poor frightened girl inside the lovely woman's body touched him in an odd way. Without thinking, he stepped closer and wrapped his arms around her, holding her against his chest as he tried to comfort. Warmth spread through him, bringing back feelings from long ago. Feelings he shouldn't be having right now.

"Y ... you ... you don't understand." She hiccupped and struck her fists against his chest.

"Yes, I do."

Through her struggles, he stroked her stiff back and within seconds she stopped, her arms snaked around his waist and her body pressed next to his. Automatically, he tightened his

hold. *What am I doing?* This was torture plain and simple. He'd never been one to comfort another. As he held her in his arms and rocked slowly back and forth, an ache in his chest grew and nearly suffocated him.

He breathed in the heavenly scent of roses from her hair. His insides turned, his chest constricted, and his heart pumped faster than it should. He'd never held a woman before without anything sexual following. And after loving her for so long, how could he stop from imagining them entwined in a lover's embrace? It was hard for him to think differently this time, especially when her soft body melted against his perfectly—better than any other woman.

He bent his head closer to her ear and whispered, "It's all right, Catherine. I'm here."

*Now why did I say that?* He really didn't want to be here for her. Didn't want to be the person she turned to for comfort whenever she had a problem, but he couldn't stop himself. The longer he held her, the more he wanted to comfort.

"It's all right ... Kitty."

Her crying stopped and her face lifted. By her wide eyes, she must have been surprised with his endearment. The nearness made his heart hammer, and the warmth expanded in his chest.

"Why did you call me Kitty?"

He gazed down into her lovely face; wet eyes, swollen lips. *Damn, she was so innocent.* Suddenly, the thought that no other man had touched her caused his loins to tighten. He

lowered his attention to her full, heart-shaped lips, battling the urge to kiss her.

But he couldn't.

He wouldn't.

Forcing himself to pull away, he took two steps back. "I ... I ... I don't know. Perhaps it's because you're cuddly as a kitten. Cat fits you, but not when your eyes are swimming with tears."

Her hands shook as she clutched them against her stomach. "When I was a child, my parents called me Cat."

His gaze swept over her body, and he cursed himself for not having better restraint over his wandering mind. "Right now, you look like a Kitty."

She smiled.

Nick's heart melted again from the tenderness of her expression, and he had to mentally shake himself out of the stupor. "You'd better wash away those tears and get some rest before tonight's activities."

Her smile faded and she nodded.

"I'm truly sorry you're so frightened. I do understand. I wish I could help." Images flashed through his mind of ways he could teach her about lovemaking, but he quickly put a stop to them. "But I cannot. You have no reason to be afraid of my father. He's gentle and kind. Just let him know your worries, and he'll understand."

"Thank you, my lord."

He winked, smiled, then left her room and hurried down the stairs into the drawing room. Gregg and Ian were absent, but his father sat in his high-backed leather chair by the

fireplace, his attention turned to the low burning flames. Grant's head turned Nick's way.

"Catherine is settled in her room," Nick informed. "She seemed very pleased with everything. I noticed you changed a lot of the furniture and redecorated a bit."

"Indeed. I didn't think she would appreciate getting your mother's second-hand furniture."

"No, probably not."

"So, son? What do you think of Catherine now that you know her better?"

Nick arched an eyebrow. "Who says I know her better?"

"Well, you did spend time with her on the trip, did you not?"

Nick walked over to the liquor bar and picked up his drink. He gulped the contents back. The burning liquid slid down his throat and he squeezed his eyes. "She was in the coach, I was on my horse. We may have visited briefly during our meals, but that was all."

"True, but since I know my son, I know you kept a close eye on her, trying to discover her faults. Am I correct?"

Nick chuckled and walked closer to the fire. "Yes, Father. I watched her to see if she had any faults, but regretfully I report she has none. Gregg and Ian found her charming and irresistible. They are the two who got to know her well, and I'm certain they'll praise her highly."

Grant laughed. "They already have, my boy. But if you didn't find any faults with her, why do you still disapprove?"

Nick blew out an aggravated breath and turned toward his father. "Because she's only eighteen, and because ... you're

dying." He hated to be blunt, but he had no other choice. He needed to make his father see how insane it was for him to marry.

Grant nodded as his gaze left Nick and rested on the small fire. "Yes, I'm dying, but do I have to be miserable until that day arrives? Catherine will make me happy. She already has. Can't you see how happy I am?"

"Yes, but I think it's rather selfish of you not to think about her needs. She'll be miserable if she's forced to remain home and take care of a dying husband. I think she'd rather be off going to balls and tea parties and jaunts in the park instead of staying home playing nursemaid."

Grant sat in silence for a long time. Usually, this was the way his father ended a conversation, but as Nick turned to leave, his father cleared his throat.

"You're correct, son. I cannot deprive her of the parties and outings and social events. I have no idea how much longer I have to live, and it's not fair of me to keep her as a nursemaid all that time." He turned and looked at Nick. "So, during the day she can be with me and tend to my needs, but at night she can be escorted to events by you."

Nick gasped. "Me? Why me?" His voice rose. "I'll not play the part of her nanny."

Grant flipped his hand through the air. "You're being over dramatic. Besides, you enjoy attending those kinds of functions with beautiful women, and so you'll take her with you when you go. Gregg and Ian can have their turns, too. I'm certain they'll love it, but since you're the titled son, you

have more responsibility. She'll be a joy to have around, just wait and see."

Grant stood, and with help from his cane, slowly made his way toward the door. Obviously, his father wanted the conversation ended. Nick clenched his jaw. Not this time. He would add his last thoughts before his father left.

"Father? What about that *problem* of yours?"

Grant came to a sharp stop inside the door. He didn't turn to look at Nick, but spoke over his shoulder. "I don't want to talk about it."

Ignoring his father's request, Nick continued. "How do you suppose you're going to take a wife without *that* particular function you never want to discuss?"

Silence lasted longer than Nick expected, but he waited for an answer, hoping this would be the key to stop these ridiculous wedding plans.

Still keeping his eyes toward the hallway, Grant spoke, his voice clipped with anger. "That's my business, and it will be taken care of *my* way." He shifted his head and glanced at Nick. "And as the son first in line to inherit, you'll follow my wishes."

"But, Father, how—"

"There'll be no more talk of this," Grant snapped, then proceeded out the door.

A blaze of fury ignited in Nick's chest the longer his father's echoing footsteps boomed in the hallway. Damn his father for putting this kind of responsibility on his shoulders. Catherine wasn't going to be *his* wife. She was to be his

father's. And then to think his stubborn father was ignoring the very thing that would legally bind him to Catherine.

"Damn it to hell," Nick swore aloud and threw his empty glass into the fireplace, shattering it into a million pieces.

His life was cursed!

\* \* \* \*

A tear slipped down Catherine's cheek as she studied her reflection in the full-length mirror at the gown Grant had purchased for her. The ice blue silk molded her shoulders and dipped between her breasts, displaying more skin than she'd ever shown before. A full, high-waist skirt fell in soft folds to a small train in the back, the style accentuating her figure. Wearing such a provocative dress in front of others scared her to death, but she worried more about seeing Grant's expression. Would her stomach churn if his face held traces of desire?

Emily left Catherine's hair loose, curling it in ringlets around her head, and then threaded a blue ribbon throughout. The color of the ribbon enhanced Catherine's auburn curls. She liked the way it made her look. For the first time, Catherine felt like a woman instead of a girl trying to resemble a woman.

Taking a deep breath, she prayed her nervous stomach wouldn't be a problem during the evening's events. How embarrassing would it be if her ailment showed itself to the guests soon to arrive tonight? She hoped her weak knees would stay strong and keep her from fainting.



But what worried her most was the inevitable kiss—the kiss to seal their betrothal announcement. Would he give it tonight? She squeezed her eyes closed. *Please, not tonight.*

If he kissed her, how could she keep from retching? Would it be obvious to everybody she loathed having his lips on hers? She quickly remembered what Nick had told her. Grant was a kind man. If she explained her fears to him, he'd understand.

While in Nick's arms earlier today, comfort had actually spread through every part of her. Tingles shot through her body at the memory. His soft voice and tender caress had helped her to relax, yet at the same time an inner fire stirred every nerve and sensitive spot on her body—places she didn't even know could react in that manner.

Perhaps she shouldn't have enjoyed those feelings. He was, after all, to be her stepson. She shook her head. She mustn't think that way. How could she think like that when he was so much older? The years between them weren't many. Ian was twenty-three, Gregg was twenty-five, and Nicholas, twenty-six. Nevertheless, she shouldn't be seeking comfort in his arms, not when that was supposed to be her soon-to-be husband's responsibility.

Her heart sank. The weeks would pass quickly before she would marry. How was she going to be able to hold up and remain strong if her heart wasn't in it?

The knock on her bedroom door made her jump back to awareness. "Yes?" her voice squeaked.

"Catherine? It is I, Gregg. Father sent me to see if you were ready."

"Yes, Gregg. I'm ready." From the adjoining bath, Emily hurried in, giving Catherine a curious look. "Go let him in," she instructed her maid.

Smoothing her hands down her silk skirt, she waited while Emily opened the door. When Gregg walked in and looked at her, his face softened and his blue eyes sparkled.

"Catherine, you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen." His gaze traveled up and down her body.

Her cheeks warmed. "Thank you, Gregg."

"Come." He held out his arm. "Let's go and let my father and brothers partake of your loveliness."

She took his arm and walked with him down the magnificent staircase. Mrs. Berkley hurried out of her room and followed not far behind. Grant, Nick, and Ian waited at the bottom, all eyes turned upward. Because of Grant's squinted eyes, she supposed he couldn't see her yet, but his sons could. Ian's jaw dropped as his focus ran up and down her length, but it was Nick's gaze that nearly shattered her defenses. His face softened and relaxed the longer he stared—from the top of her ringlet-styled hair to the tips of her ice blue satin-heeled slippers. It wasn't the fact he admired her that was rattling, but the way he did it. His heated expression made her feel as if she stood before him in her undergarments. The look on his face was similar to when she'd seen him stare down the serving woman's blouse yesterday. He had desire in his eyes then, and he certainly had it now. The realization made her heart pound and her legs weaken.

Finally, she stood in front of Grant, his eyes clearer now. His gaze ran over her, and it was almost the same way Nick had because she felt as if he could see right through her dress to her bare skin. But instead of making her limbs melt, her skin crawled.

"Catherine, my darling. You're such a vision of beauty," Grant told her as he took her trembling hands in his. "I'm going to be the envy of every man in attendance this evening."

It took all her effort to smile, and her voice refused to work.

His gaze strayed to her bare neck. "There's something missing, though. You look a little cold."

He let go of her hands and reached in the pocket of his over jacket, pulling out a long black, velvet box. When he opened it, she widened her eyes and gasped. A pearl and diamond necklace and matching earbobs lay inside.

"I think these will warm you this evening," Grant said.

She'd never seen anything so extravagant in her life, and the sight of them temporarily made her forget her unease.

"Oh, Grant ... I couldn't."

He chuckled. "Yes, you can. I'll not take no for an answer."

Reaching out with her gloved hand, she tenderly touched the necklace. "Oh, Grant, this is so unexpected ... and they're so beautiful. Thank you."

Grant turned to Nick. "Son? Will you do me the honor of placing this around her neck? I fear the clasp is too small for my eyes."

"Yes, Father."

Nick picked up the necklace and stepped behind her, circling it around her neck. The warmth from his unsteady hands burned her skin, and she inhaled sharply. His hot breath caressed her neck and sent chills down her spine. After he was done, he stepped back. She turned, and with shaky hands, reached out for the earbobs and placed them on her earlobes.

"There," Grant said, "your perfection is complete." He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, then wrapped his arms around her tightly. Panic suffocated her, and she wanted to press the palms of her hands against his chest to stop him, but he soon pulled away, and she breathed a sigh of relief. She prayed this was all the affection he'd show her tonight.

Grant turned to his sons beside him. "Boys? Why don't you give Catherine a little hug, since she's practically part of the family." He looked back at her. "As long as you approve, my dear."

She laughed lightly, not knowing what the appropriate answer should be. Was it proper? It must be, since Grant instigated the idea and Mrs. Berkley had yet to object. She shrugged. "I suppose that's permissible."

Ian was the first to give Catherine a hug, and then he placed a small kiss on her cheek. "Welcome to the family," he cheered.

Gregg was up next, giving her a hug, then while she was still in his arms, he too, kissed her cheek. Catherine chuckled over this encounter also, because Gregg's eyes darkened.

All sense of buoyancy disappeared when Nick stepped up. Instead of being fun and playful like his brothers, Nick appeared solemn, his eyes sparkling with the same look he had as he watched her come down the stairs earlier.

Her heart lodged in her throat when he circled his arms around her waist, holding her close for a hug. The hug seemed to last a little longer than Gregg or Ian's, and the heat from his body quickly seeped through her dress. She hadn't experienced this with the others.

Nick's hot hands pressed lower on her back where his brothers hadn't touched, and a strange thrill shot through her. He drew back just enough to bend his head and place his tender lips to her cheek. But it wasn't in the same spot his brothers had kissed. It was closer to her mouth.

Fireworks exploded inside her head. She closed her eyes. Her body melted against his as she clung to his broad shoulders. This kiss was far different from what Gregg or Ian had given. Her heart pounded fiercely and her legs weakened with excitement. A burst of desire shoot through her, the secret places on her body warmed with an unknown emotion.

No! Her mind screamed for these feelings to stop—yet she didn't want them to stop. She shouldn't be feeling this way. Not toward him.

Catherine was the one to pull away. A blush crept up her neck to her face as she stared into Nick's eyes. At first, desire had darkened them, then his face changed to a look of confusion, and then his whole expression switched once again to indifference as he stepped back.

Always, My Love  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

She quickly glanced at Nick's brothers, then to Grant, but they seemed unaware that the earth had moved for her. Nick's kiss was probably very brief, but for her, it seemed to last forever.

Grant cleared his throat. "Shall we go now and start receiving our guests?" He held his arm for her.

Hesitantly, she placed her hand on his arm and allowed him to lead her to the ballroom.

What had just happened? And why in the name of heaven had she liked it?

## **Four**

As each hour passed, a whirlwind of confusion swam in Catherine's head. She shook hands with and met more people than she cared to remember. Scores of men gallantly asked for a dance during the night. Women chatted nonstop about tea parties, which created a slow ache in her skull. After a while, their names became a blur. The only thing on her mind was the way Nick's lips caressed her skin and how his body had ignited hers.

Hordes of people stood in line to meet her, Grant's older sister, Gertrude, one of them. The withered, gray haired woman would be staying with them for an extended visit until the wedding. It was only proper to have another woman in the house besides Mrs. Berkley.

Catherine smiled politely at the older woman, yet dread washed over her. How could she possibly keep Grant's sister entertained? It was obvious the woman couldn't hear very well. Catherine had to repeat herself several times, each time raising her voice a notch.

When she received a break from the guests, she moved to the buffet table. More food than she'd ever seen was piled atop the tables, yet her stomach didn't want nourishment at this time. The orchestra playing in the garden astounded her, and everything left her feeling dazed as if she were floating from above watching the activities.

Or was it Nick's kiss that made her feel this way?

Gregg and Ian had asked her to dance. Being fun and playful, they helped her relax. Thankfully, Nick hadn't asked

her. She didn't know how she'd react to being in his arms again. Grant would probably not dance with her because of his health. The party had sapped his strength, and he remained in his chair as the night progressed. His eyelids drooped and suddenly she wished he'd not gone all out for her. Would it be impolite to tell his guests to leave so he could rest?

Out of the corner of her eye, Grant struggled to stand, and when he gained his balance, he clinked a spoon against his champagne glass. Beside him, Nick motioned for her to come over. Her stomach twisted. Would Grant announce their betrothal so soon? Clutching her trembling hands against her stomach, she breathed deeply.

She walked to them on stiff legs. Nick met her gaze briefly, then looked away. Would she ever make *that man* happy? But he wasn't hers to make happy ... not the way she'd always dreamed about.

She willed her knees not to buckle and her stomach to keep from rolling. No matter what happened, she couldn't embarrass herself or Grant's family tonight. She pasted on a smile and gazed up at Grant.

The room grew silent.

"Friends, thank you for coming tonight," Grant began. "I've waited four long years for this day to arrive, and now that it's here, I feel rather anxious. Tonight I want to introduce you to the daughter of my very good friends, Reverend Henry and his wife, the late Sophia Martin." Grant looked down at her. "Tonight I'm launching Miss Catherine Martin into society."



Cheers echoed through the room as champagne glasses were raised in the air. Grant squeezed her hand, then bent his head to hers. She panicked once again, but he only brushed a kiss on her cheek.

Relief swept through her. He didn't announce their betrothal. How much longer did she have to suffer, awaiting that moment? Hopefully, he'd give her time to get to know him better.

The same people she'd been introduced to earlier came up and congratulated her. Keeping her smile from wavering, she stood patiently and shook hands with Grant's guests, knowing she'd not remember one soul tomorrow.

During one of the breaks when the guests weren't accosting her, she looked down at Grant, who'd taken to his chair again. "Grant? You don't look well." She laid her hand against his cheek. "Would you like to go to your room and rest?"

Grant gazed up into her face as his unsteady hand closed over hers. "No, my dear," he wheezed. "Truly, I'm fine. Do you like your party?"

She smiled. "Yes."

"You dance very well. You're the belle of the ball."

She widened her smile. "I think it's because I've had such great dance partners."

"Oh, my sweet." He sighed as his hand dropped to his lap robe. "How I wish I was strong enough to dance with you. I used to be a superb dancer in my younger days."

"I'm certain you were. If your sons learned anything from you, that would explain their ability to make me look so good on the dance floor."

He laughed weakly. "Would you like to dance again?"

"Oh, no, Grant. You're much too weak, so I shall stay by your side."

"I know, my dear, but a beautiful woman like you should be out on the dance floor, and so you will." He turned and called out Nick's name.

Her heart plummeted. When Nick's head snapped her way, her heart jumped then thumped in a faster rhythm.

Nick stepped away from the flock of women surrounding him. "Yes, Father?"

"Nick, my boy? My beautiful Catherine needs to dance with a strong man. Will you do me the honor of dancing with her?"

"I would be delighted."

As she placed her hand on his arm and followed him to the dance floor, her breaths came quicker. So far this evening, she'd held herself together quite well, but now her good fortune was about to end.

\* \* \* \*

Nick breathed slower. He didn't want to appear as if his heart were going to leap right out of his chest. The orchestra began playing a waltz, so he took her in his arms and gracefully swept her around the floor.

*It's happening again, damn it.* Her nearness made desire roar in his body. It must be because of the way her body fit so perfectly into that beautiful gown. The softness of the

material made her skin seem like cream, and her huge violet eyes appeared even bigger, lovelier than he could ever imagine. Her auburn hair shimmered like a pre-dawn morning. He couldn't tear his gaze from her. She, on the other hand, didn't meet his eyes, and suddenly, he wanted her attention on him and couldn't wait a moment longer.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself this evening," he commented, which brought her gaze up to meet his. Warmth spread through his chest and he smiled.

"What do you mean? All I've been doing is meeting people and dancing."

He chuckled. "Yes, and here in the country, this is usually the highlight of our lives." He shrugged. "We're quite the boring lot, are we not?"

Her sultry chuckle fed his hunger up a notch.

"I've met many people, and I've yet to be bored."

"And how can you be? You've become quite popular tonight. Rumors spread like wildfire when the *ton* heard my father was sponsoring the Revenant's daughter, and they couldn't wait to meet you."

"And what are the rumors now?"

"Everyone seems to approve, and the men cannot take their eyes off you." *I for one.*

When the color in her cheeks darkened, Nick grinned. *Adorable.*

"But I'm to be betrothed to your father."

"True, but that isn't public knowledge yet. Besides, most of these men know how feeble my father is, and so they're anticipating the moment you take a lover."

She gasped. "A ... lover? Surely, you jest."

"No. In fact, most married couples do that, secretly of course, but we eventually find out."

"Well, I'll not do that. I was brought up to respect my husband and not take my marriage vows lightly."

"Glad to hear it." His arm tightened around her small waist. "Perhaps now I won't have to worry about you."

She blushed again and looked away.

He liked the nervous look on her face, knowing he was the one to make her this way—the same skittish way she'd been with him when he kissed her this afternoon. Although it'd been a simple kiss, one witnessed by her lady's companion and his family, it didn't stop his loins from tightening. Amazing what that brief, pleasurable experience had done to his insides.

"So, Catherine, did you feel repulsed by my father's kiss today?"

Her gaze snapped up to his, eyes wide. "No. It wasn't anything like the kiss he gave me at age fourteen."

"So you're saying you enjoyed his kiss this afternoon?"

She shrugged. "I cannot be certain. At least I wasn't repulsed by it."

"I'm sure it pleased you to be kissed by my brothers though."

She shook her head. "It was about the same as when your father kissed me."

"So, none of *our* kisses excited you?"

Her slender throat jumped, and he assumed her gulp was harder than she'd anticipated by the noise it made. She licked

her lips and looked away. His heart sang with victory. She'd told him what he wanted to know. His kiss *had* affected her.

"I don't think we should be discussing this." She lowered her voice.

"Then what topic would you like to move on to?" His voice softened and he pulled her body closer.

"I—I—" She glanced over his shoulder, trying not to meet his eyes, but he could tell she studied something. Then her eyes flew back to his. "Lord Castledale, I need your help."

"Please, don't be so formal with my name. I remember when you used to call me Nicholas."

She smiled and nodded. "Nicholas, will you help me?"

He liked the way her voice practically sang when she said his name. "With what?"

"I need you to help me get rid of all these people."

He couldn't understand why she had said that, but because of the lust growing hotter inside his body, he assumed she wanted to be alone with him. He shouldn't be feeling this way. It must be the four glasses of champagne...

His smile softened. "Why? What do you have in mind, my dear?" His voice, huskier than it should be.

She peeked over his shoulder again. "I'm worried about your father. He's so tired, and I fear he'll collapse if we don't get him up to bed to rest."

Inwardly, he groaned. *I'm such an ass ... and inconsiderate son.* Why in hell's name was he playing the part of a seducer when Catherine clearly stated she didn't take her betrothal vows lightly? Although the contract hadn't been officially signed, she and his father were practically engaged.

And right now, she was sticking to her promise of making his father happy. He hadn't seen his father this ecstatic in months. He cursed his wayward thoughts.

He glanced over his shoulder at his father. Weariness drew lines on the older man's face, making him appear much older than his years. "You're correct. We need to get him up to his room. I'll help you take him up, then I'll come back down and give the excuses to our guests." The music ended and he moved away, but she remained standing in place. He creased his forehead. "What's wrong?"

"I—uh, I don't think it's proper for me to get him ready for bed. After all, I'm not married to him."

Nick laughed. "Kitty, my sweet, he has a valet who does that for him. All you have to do is help me take him up the stairs and tell him goodnight."

Her worried expression eased. "Indeed? That's all?"

"Yes." He laughed and moved over to her, taking her hand and hooking it around his elbow. "Come, let's go rescue my father."

\* \* \* \*

Catherine stood back at the foot of Grant's bed as his valet tucked the blankets in around his waist. Witnessing such a personal thing seemed improper, yet Grant had assured her since they were practically engaged, it was suitable. She glanced over her shoulder toward the door. Would Mrs. Berkley come and rescue her? The older lady must not have seen her leave the party.

*This isn't right.* Soon she would be alone with Grant. Even Nick had left to go downstairs.

When she looked back at Grant, she frowned. Fatigue had carved a permanent shadow on his still handsome features, and her heart clenched. The servant turned and walked away. Grant's gaze searched the room until it stopped on her, and a weary smile claimed his face.

"My dear, sweet, Catherine. You're so very caring to leave your guests and see to my welfare."

"You're more important. I want you to regain your strength and be the healthy man I remember from my youth."

"Come closer, my dear, so that I can see you clearly."

Hesitantly, she did as asked, moving around the bed over to his side. Her heart hammered against her ribs. She patted his hand, but he clasped it with his.

"Catherine? Are you happy here?"

She scrunched her forehead. *Was she?* Yes, she was happy—until she remembered she'd soon be his wife. But right now, somber would best describe her feelings.

"Of course, Grant. Your family is very kind to me. Your friends have given me a warm welcome tonight. How could I not be happy?"

"How is Nick treating you?"

Her mouth turned dry, yet her hands became moist. Memories from their brief kiss flowed through her mind. She swallowed the lump lodged in her throat. "Nick is slowly realizing I'll be part of the family. When I first met him, he was a little reserved, but he's now coming to terms with our

arrangement. A little while ago when we danced, he was very charming."

Grant nodded. "Nick can put on a good appearance in public, but don't worry, he'll soon understand why I've chosen you."

She smiled, but during the next pause of silence, his gaze moved off her face, down her neck to her bosom. Her heart thumped in a fierce rhythm. The heated expression on his face changed him so drastically, almost as if she stood next to an entirely different person. Chills of dread crawled up her spine, making her stomach lurch. What's wrong with him? Why does he look like that?

"You're so very beautiful," he whispered, his voice sounded almost foreign to her.

She sucked in her breath. Would he do something improper? *Oh, where are you Mrs. Berkley? And Nick, come back!*

His eyes fluttered closed. Relief poured through her and she sighed.

"Go now and enjoy the rest of the party," he spoke with great effort. "I'm so thrilled that you're finally here. I have waited so long ... so long to see you again ... Sophia." Deep breaths consumed his weary body.

Catherine stared blankly at him, her head pounding. Had she heard him wrong or had he really called her Sophia? Why would he mistake her for her mother, unless...

She gasped, covered her mouth and rushed out of the room, her mind piecing everything together. He wanted her because she looked so much like her mother. She'd



resembled her mother at age fourteen, and that was when Grant offered for her. Since he couldn't have her mother, he was going to have her.

Oh, God, what would she do now? Was it too late to call everything off?

She took slow steps down the long staircase, her mind spinning in a million different directions, keeping her from thinking straight. Really, there was nothing else to think about. She was stuck. Although the betrothal agreement hadn't been signed, for some inane reason, her father would sign it without question. She'd practically been announced as Grant's fiancée this very night, and so she had to go through with it. She'd be expected to treat Grant like a husband, even when he looked upon her and saw her mother.

She rubbed her forehead. Why was life so complicated? Why did her parents have to promise her to a man who looked at her as if she were somebody else? How could she share intimacies with him when he'd think of her mother the whole time? This wasn't fair!

"Damn it," she cursed fate aloud in vile anger, hitting her fist into the railing on the stairs.

\* \* \* \*

Nick walked through the hallway, heading toward the staircase when the sweet voice of a woman cursing floated through the air. He widened his eyes and bit his bottom lip to keep from laughing. Obviously she thought she was the only one in the house. But after he turned the corner and noticed the woman was Catherine, he did laugh—and hard.

She jumped from his sudden outburst and stopped on the stairs. Her face flamed at least three shades of red, which made his laughter grow.

"The perfect Catherine has a flaw after all." Nick leaned his hip against the banister and stared up at her. He hated to admit, because he didn't want to soften his heart toward her, but she looked extremely lovely right now; so pure, so virginal, but mostly desirable even with a scarlet-colored face.

"I'm not perfect," she snapped and straightened her back as she continued to descend.

He chuckled. "Yes, I know. But there for a while, I thought you were."

She stopped on the step in front of him. "You—you—you weren't supposed to hear that."

"Obviously, but I'm very grateful you rewarded me the privilege."

She huffed. "If you were a real gentleman, you'd pretend not to hear, and you'd certainly not tease me about it."

Laughter quickly left him as he moved in front of her. Since she stood on the bottom step, it made her exactly his height.

"What makes you presume I'm a gentleman?"

Confusion creased her brow. "Nicholas? What are you saying?"

In one quick motion, he clamped his hands around her waist and roughly pulled her body against his. She gasped. Was it in fear or pleasure? He couldn't be certain, but the sweet sound of her voice had turned up the heat inside of him. He cursed the several glasses of champagne he'd

consumed tonight ... and the longing for a woman he could never have.

"I'm not going to lie to you and tell you I'm a gentleman. In fact, my sweet Catherine, I'll warn you. I'm a rake, a seducer of innocents, so beware. You don't want to play your feminine games with me because if you do, you'll not escape unscathed."

His original intent was to frighten her so she'd leave him alone, slap him, or say something nasty to make him stop. But the heavy breaths fanning his face and the quivering body beneath his hands told him she wasn't frightened at all. It was something entirely different. *Very sensual.*

Her gaze dropped to his mouth, and suddenly the urge to kiss her overpowered him. Damn him, but he couldn't resist.

He roughly pressed his mouth to hers. It was a kiss meant to punish her, but instead, it tortured him. Her lips were so very soft, and automatically they opened beneath his.

Pulling back, he hesitated. *What am I doing?* But she leaned forward, her eyes closed. Damn him, but she wanted it too!

He groaned and placed his mouth over hers, slanting as he slid his tongue inside. Her body stiffened, but the moment his tongue touched hers, she sighed and melted into his arms.

He tightened his hold to keep her from falling. When she wrapped her arms around his neck, he softened the kiss. Fireworks exploded in his head and a strange dizziness took over. He moved his hands all over her back and down toward her buttocks, cupping her, pulling her closer to his growing arousal.

Always, My Love  
by Phyllis Campbell

Warning bells rang through his head, telling him this was something he shouldn't be doing. She wasn't some other man's property, but his *father's* fiancée.

He forced himself to break the passionate kiss. He held her until she was able to stand on her own, then he yanked his hands away as if she were on fire.

Catherine's wide-eyed gaze stayed on his for the longest time as her ragged breaths continued. He tried to unscramble the turbulent thoughts, but no explanation came. Before he followed through with his yearnings and took her back into his arms, he cursed fate and moved past her, bolting up the stairs to his father's room.

## Five

*Dark. Cold. Silence deafened the night. Misty darkness swarmed through the room like an eerie fog of the unknown. She crawled out of bed. Everything seemed to spin around her and she grabbed her head. Her skull throbbed as though she'd consumed an entire bottle of spirits, yet she knew she had not.*

*"Mother?" she whispered as she fought for control.*

*Taking careful steps, she made her way to the bedroom door and opened it. "Mother?" she called out again. But silence washed over the house.*

*She blinked, adjusting her vision to the darkness as she moved down the hall. The door to her parent's room stood ajar. Had Father returned from his week of sermons? She peeked inside. No, he hadn't.*

*"Mother?" She raised her voice, worry creeping inside her chest as she padded down the stairs. Still no answer.*

*When she reached the bottom of the steps and turned toward the living room, she stopped. A gasp flew from her throat and she covered her mouth.*

*Remnants of what used to be her sofa lay ripped and scattered over the floor. Dishes from the cabinet were in pieces. Chairs had been turned over, legs were broken.*

*Her heartbeat increased. Her body shook.*

*"Mother?"*

*She swung toward the kitchen. Curtains had been ripped from the window, allowing the moonlight to shine through. Tears stung her eyes, blurring her vision. But not enough to*

*keep her from seeing stains of red splattered on the wall, on the table, on the floor, covering a still body...*

*"Mother!"*

*She ran to her mother and knelt by her side. With the moon's help, the color of death became apparent on her mother's face. Her nightgown had been ripped in many places, stained crimson. The poker from the fireplace bloody as it lay beside the body.*

*Catherine reached out to touch, but withdrew her shaky hand. It didn't matter. Her mother was dead. Murdered.*

*Once again, the mist of darkness flooded her head, made her mind spin out of control. As if seeing the next few months fly before her eyes. The funeral. Her father's accusations. Returning to school lonelier than she'd been before.*

*She squeezed her eyes shut to fight the bad memories washing through. But another image came to her. A handsome man with dark hair and sparkling blue eyes. Hypnotizing eyes.*

*Nicholas!*

*She was with him on the stairs again, wrapped in his comforting arms while his mouth devoured hers. Memories of her mother's death left and she drifted into a blissful state where only Nick could take her. She smiled.*

*Within moments they were lying on a bed ... Grant's bed, but it was Nick holding her and touching her. His hand kneaded her breast. Her whole body tingled then burned. She was naked—just as he, and his hands ran all over her bare skin, exciting her like never before. He loomed over her and*

*kissed her, his tongue mating with hers. A groan escaped her. She wanted more.*

*Threading her fingers through his hair, she caressed his head, holding him down to partake of his breath-taking kiss. He caressed her breast and she arched.*

*"Nick," she whispered.*

*He lifted from her and she opened her eyes. Instead of Nick, Grant stared at her with sightless eyes, a scowl creased on his forehead and tight mouth.*

Catherine sprang to a sitting position in bed, clutching the covers at her neck. Her breaths were quick, harsh. Her heart pounded a fierce rhythm while a heavy pain gathered in her chest. Although a dream, it seemed real. Guilt for kissing Nick last night had condemned her for certain. Yet why did she dream about the time she found her mother?

A tear slid down her cheek and she wiped it. How long had she been crying? Apparently, the dream caused more heartache than she'd been prepared for.

Lying back, she clutched a pillow to her chest and rocked. It'd been quite a while since the confused memories from when her mother died long ago crushed her so much she couldn't breathe. Her Father had told her memory loss was a sign of her mother's illness. A shiver ran through her and she pushed the thoughts aside.

She dragged herself out of bed and let Emily help her with a bath and dress her for the day. Glancing in the mirror, the yellow and white balloon-sleeved day dress added to her complexion and brightened her face. Unfortunately, it didn't

do anything to lift her spirits or erase the throbbing headache from her horrible dream.

Her crushed heart reminded her she couldn't have these feelings for Nick. It was wrong. Somehow, she had to take control over her body and make certain he never affected her again.

After Emily finished brushing Catherine's hair, she wound the thickness into a loose bun and covered it with white netting. She looked elegant, and she hoped her high-neck yellow day dress wouldn't tempt either man today.

She took her time going down to the dining room. As she neared, men's voices echoed through the halls, and she realized she'd made the right decision to awaken this early. Apparently, the rest of the household did also. When she entered, all three brothers ceased their discussion and turned their eyes toward her. Right away Gregg and Ian stood, and by Nick's tight lips, he appeared too irritated to show her a little respect as he slowly lifted himself out of the chair.

She gave them her best smile. "Good morning, gentlemen."

Her gaze flew to Nick when she realized what she'd just said. He arched an eyebrow and a glimmer of humor touched his expression before disappearing. She had to remember that although Nick may not be a gentleman, his brothers were.

Gregg pulled out the empty chair next to him for her to sit. "We didn't think you'd be awake this early, especially after the late night you had."



"I'm usually an early riser. Is that suitable for the country life?" She sat and the men followed.

"Yes," Gregg answered. "We're just not used to women being up so early, but it's a pleasant change."

"I must apologize. I suppose I'm not like most women."

"That's fine with us," Ian spoke.

"It's refreshing to have someone who's out of the ordinary," Gregg cut in. "We're getting rather bored with the ordinary, aren't we, Nick?"

Nick was in the middle of sipping his tea, and she waited for him to put down his cup before responding.

"Yes, most certainly." He paused and met her stare. "How did you sleep, Catherine? Comfortably, I hope?"

"Oh, yes. My bed is just perfect." His stare caused her bosom to burn and a blush crept up her cheeks, so she quickly asked, "Where's Grant? Is he not up yet?"

Ian shook his head. "Father usually sleeps later."

"I'm certain he needs the rest after last night." She shook her head. "He looked so fatigued."

A maid brought over a dish of scones and honey butter, eggs with a slice of ham and set it in front of her, then left. The orange juice and tea were already on the table. It wasn't until the heady aroma of the meat touched her senses that her stomach growled.

"So," Gregg said as he turned toward her, "what do you have planned for today?"

"I'm not certain. What's there to do?"

Ian chuckled. "Weren't you invited to brunches or tea parties with the other women last night?"

"Honestly, I cannot remember. Most of the evening passed by so fast it wasn't much more than a blur. There were only a few things I vividly remember." Her attention darted to Nick who still watched her, but this time he looked bored. She quickly switched her focus back to Ian. "But the few things I do remember didn't include tea parties."

"No need to distress." Ian patted her hand. "The proper way to invite is with an invitation. Besides, they'll probably give you about a week before the barracudas start hounding you."

She laughed. "Thank heavens for that."

"I know what we can do," Ian spoke to Gregg. "We can take Catherine with us on our morning ride."

Gregg grinned and met Catherine's stare. "Yes. If my memory serves me correctly, I think you used to ride quite well back in your younger years."

Enthusiasm bubbled inside her. "Well, I'll have you know that age has only improved my ability to ride."

"Splendid," Gregg cheered.

Nick pushed away from the table and stood. "I hope you three have an entertaining time this morning."

"Aren't you joining us?" Ian asked.

"No. I have important matters to attend." He nodded. "Good day." Lifting his chin, he walked out of the dining room.

Catherine took a refreshing breath now that he was gone.

Gregg and Ian stood. "Catherine? Finish eating and we'll get the horses ready."

She nodded. "I will."

Nick's attitude about everything disappointed her. Best that he act this way. She could handle her emotions better when he was mean and rude. Last night proved she couldn't be around him when he was charming.

She cursed herself again for behaving how she had last night with Nick. She blamed it on the few glasses of champagne she'd consumed during her reception. But then, what was Nick's excuse? He could have easily left her alone, walked right by her on the stairs without touching her. So why did he feel it necessary to hold her and punish her with his intoxicating kiss?

She growled and stabbed her fork into the sliced up banana. Nick should have realized her innocence. He certainly wasn't aware of her childhood fantasies. Didn't he know these kind of sexual feelings were foreign to her? Perhaps that's why she'd fallen so easily into his arms and let his tongue boldly enter her mouth. The thrill of letting him do what he wished had been so great she'd acted like a woman starved for affection.

She sighed. She might be craving that kind of affection, but unfortunately, not from her own intended.

After finishing her breakfast, she hurried upstairs to have Emily help her change into a riding habit. Grant, of course, had purchased this along with everything else she owned. The forest green material with elegant black trim, and the white silk blouse ruffling at her neck and wrists added maturity to her appearance. Once her attire was completed, she grabbed a matching hat with a jaunty feather fluffed at the side and

left the room. Venturing outside, she met Gregg and Ian by the stables.

Both brothers were very attentive, going out of their way to make certain she was happy. They helped her mount a white thoroughbred mare that Grant had previously purchased for her.

"Ian and I thought you might like to have a tour around the estate," Gregg mentioned.

She smiled. "I'd like that very much."

Gregg led the trio for the countryside tour. The wide-open fields of greenery cleared Catherine's mind of everything except the beauty of the land ... and the man inside the house that wouldn't leave her thoughts.

\* \* \* \*

Nick paced in his study as he flexed his hands, unable to concentrate. Memories of yesterday occupied his mind. *Damn that champagne!* Why else would he talk to Catherine the way he did and hungrily kiss her as if his sole purpose was to seduce her? She was off limits to him, for hell's sake. She was here to make his dying father's last days happy and exciting—not to get him sexually flustered.

And why in the hell did she have to be so damn beautiful? Not only was she lovely, but charming and witty, so different from any other woman he'd met before. It surprised him when he heard her curse, yet delighted him. Ladies of quality usually refrained from using such language—but not his Kitty. It reminded him of the Catherine he had fallen in love with as a young boy. Instead of turning him away, it drew him closer.

He suddenly wanted to be near her, making her do and say things other ladies never said or did.

That could never happen. He growled and punched his fist into his leather chair. He needed to get her off his mind and keep her out.

"Excuse me, my lord?" The butler interrupted Nick's thoughts as he entered the study.

"Yes, Gentry?"

"Your secretary is here. Shall I show him in?"

"Of course."

George Crane was a mild-mannered employee, which was why Nick worked so well with him. Although slightly older than Nick, Crane's brown hair showed signs of thinning. Nick thanked his good fortune he still had a thick head of hair.

"My lord, did I arrive at a bad time?" George asked.

Nick breathed deeply, trying to get his sexual frustration under control as he sat down at his desk. "No. I just have a lot on my mind. Please, sit and we'll begin." He motioned toward the empty chair on the side of his desk.

George took a seat across from him and then Nick started the meeting. But too many times during the hour, his mind wandered outside, especially when he heard a woman's laughter as she raced her horse near his office window. He glanced out the window, hoping to get a glimpse of her, but only her angelic voice flitted through the air. Shaking his head at the interruption, he checked his ledger again.

He hadn't realized how many times he stopped in the middle of a sentence as his mind drifted to Catherine, until George suggested calling a halt and rescheduling. Nick quickly

snapped back to the present and insisted they finish. Finally, after what seemed a very long two hours, he concluded his business and sent George on his way.

He moved over to the decanter of brandy on the side bar and poured a drink. It was still too early in the day to indulge in spirits, but he needed something to keep his mind off a certain beautiful woman with the most tempting lips. He conjured up an image of her on horseback, her long auburn hair flapping behind her in the breeze as she raced. Her breasts would bounce...

"Nick? Are you busy?"

Nick swung his head around to face his father. "No. Not at this particular moment." Guilt ate at him for having such thoughts about his father's future bride.

"Good." Grant took careful steps into the study and lowered himself into the chair by the fireplace.

His father's precise movements drew his attention. "How do you feel today?"

"I'm still quite tired from last night's celebration, but that's to be expected."

Nick studied his father's frail face. "Are you regretting your decision to bring Catherine here then?"

Grant's head snapped around to meet Nick's stare. "Of course not. Bringing her here was the best thing in the world. I'm happy. I feel complete."

Nick turned to the liquor counter and refilled his glass. "I'm sorry if I made you upset, but I had to ask." He sat in the chair across from his father. "You just look so weary today."

"Well, I may be tired, but I'm not unhappy."

"Glad to hear it."

Grant took a deep breath, and released it with a ragged sigh. "Son? I need to ask you for a favor."

"What's that?"

"Will you take Catherine into London so she can do some shopping? I wish I could do it, but I haven't any energy left in me."

Nick's heart sank, yet at the same time, his pulse quickened with the mere thought of being alone with her—alone as he could be with Mrs. Berkley anyway. "Father, I'm quite busy today. Sorry."

"That's understandable, so if not today, then how is your schedule tomorrow?"

His father would push and prod until he got his way, so Nick gave in. "As you wish. I'll take her tomorrow."

Grant smiled. "Thank you, Nick. You've always been such an obedient boy."

Nick tossed back his glass and gulped down the remaining liquid. Yes, he'd always been the obedient son. It was his station in life. His duty. He was, after all, the son who stood to inherit the title.

"And where is my darling Catherine?"

"Gregg and Ian took her and Mrs. Berkley riding, and by the sounds of the commotion that interrupted my business meeting all morning, they're doing more than having a quaint little jaunt around the grounds. In fact, by the sounds of it, I'd guess the three were racing instead."

Grant laughed. "Yes. I wouldn't doubt that a bit. If my memory serves me correctly, Catherine used to race all of her

childhood friends and win." His laughter grew. "I even remember a time when she'd raced you."

Against his own will, Nick grinned. "Yes, but she never won. She came close, but I think I let her to make her feel better."

"You always were a considerate boy."

Laughter entered the hallway from outside the study door. It appeared as if Gregg, Ian, and Catherine were teasing each other.

"Catherine, my dear?" Grant's voice rose. "Could you please come in the study?"

Nick's eyes darted to the door in anticipation. When she entered, the rhythm of his heart picked up. She had changed out of her yellow morning dress into a luscious green riding habit. The short waist jacket hugged her breasts like a second layer of skin, and Nick's body reacted. He swore under his breath.

Her face glowed with laughter, and her always-perfect hair appeared slightly messed in the thick braid that hung down her back. It literally took his breath away. A few loose hairs around her face and neck clung to her slightly damp skin—so damn desirable. He found his lower region rather uncomfortable the longer he stared, but he didn't want to look away.

Catherine walked to Grant and kissed him on the cheek. "Good morning. How are you feeling today?" she asked sweetly.

"Much better now that I've seen your lovely face. You must be an early riser."



"I should apologize, because the truth is I cannot sleep once the sun's awake."

Grant caressed her cheek. "You do whatever pleases you. I only want to make you happy."

She answered with another smile.

"My dear," Grant continued, "how would you like to take a day doing nothing but shopping to your heart's delight?"

"Why do I need to go shopping?"

The men in the room chuckled, but Grant answered. "Why? Do you really need a reason?" He went on. "I want you to, that's why. I want you to buy whatever your heart desires. You'll need many more dresses for all the parties and balls you will be invited to, and because you'll soon be a duchess, you'll need to look the part."

Catherine's smile disappeared and a frown crossed her brow. "But, Grant? I have no idea how to attire myself as a duchess."

"My dear, don't worry your pretty little head about that. Nick has agreed to take you into London tomorrow and help you get what you need."

Nick waited for Catherine's eyes to meet his, and when they did, they widened. Her cheeks darkened.

"Nicholas is going to take me?"

"Yes, my dear." Grant grasped her hand and patted it. "I would, but I'm still too weak, and I don't want to postpone your trip any longer. You don't mind, do you?"

"No," she answered, keeping her eyes on Nick. "Just as long as I'm not a bother."

Nick stood and carried his glass to the side bar. "Don't be ridiculous," he told her over his shoulder. "You won't be a bother."

"Very well, then. Tomorrow will be fine."

There was a slight shake in her voice, and he grinned to himself over her nervousness.

"Good. Everything is settled," Grant replied. "So, Catherine, how was your morning ride?"

Nick turned and leaned back against the side bar as he studied Catherine. Her smile and eyes widened as she proceeded to tell Grant about the ride around the estate and how it turned into a horse race instead of a tour. Because she had won the first race, Gregg and Ian challenged her to another, and another, until they could finally beat her. Poor Mrs. Berkley was left behind, more upset than a mule. Everyone laughed.

The longer Nick kept his eyes on her and listened to her sweet voice, the angrier he became. The thought of her becoming his father's wife bore in his gut like an infection, eating away his very will to breathe. Everyone loved her—but he couldn't. Not the way he wanted. His two idiotic brothers gazed upon her with such admiration written all over their spellbound faces, and Nick's father ... well, his father had been smitten from the very beginning when she was only fourteen years old.

Although Nick fought it like crazy, he was drawn to her, and this helplessness upset him. He did *not* want to be lured by her charm.

"Catherine, my dear, I'm in the mood for a ride in my carriage. Would you come with me, my dear?" Grant asked.

She hesitated briefly then nodded. "I need to freshen myself a little first. Do you mind waiting a few minutes?"

"Of course not."

"Besides that, you'd better send a servant to go find Mrs. Berkley. I fear she must have lost her way."

Once again, everyone laughed, except Nick. She turned and her dress swished with her hurried steps. When she was out of hearing distance, he asked his father, "Do you really think going for a drive is a good idea? You're still very exhausted from last night."

"Nonsense." Grant waved his hand through the air, shoeing him away as he stood. "I'd like some private time with her, and that my dear boy, is worth an outing."

Nick didn't argue, only because it wouldn't do him any good. Once Grant made up his mind, that was the end of their conversation.

Grant put all his support on his cane as he walked out of the room. Nick hurried to his side to help him outside to await the carriage. Excitement danced in his father's eyes, and this worried Nick. What if his father got too wound up and his heart couldn't take it? Hell, any normal man would be overly anxious to be alone with Catherine. Look at the way he had reacted last night.

Suddenly, the thought of Catherine in his father's arms gnawed at his heart, and jealousy buried itself deep inside. He gritted his teeth and willed the thought away. She belonged to his father, not him.

It surprised Nick when Catherine came outside not more than fifteen minutes later. He'd never seen a woman take less than an hour to ready herself. And in the small amount of time, Catherine's hair had been taken out of her thick braid and brushed, then pulled away from her face with a ribbon. She still wore her riding habit, but it looked like it had been wiped clean.

Because they had yet to find Mrs. Berkley, Catherine's maid went along. Nick helped his father into the open carriage first, then turned and aided Catherine. When a whiff of her rose scent touched his senses, his stomach flipped. He hardened his jaw. Why on earth did he let her affect him like this? Where in the hell was his self control? But more importantly, where was his mind?

Nick stood back with his brothers as his father, Catherine, and her maid drove off together, Catherine doing the driving, of course.

"Doesn't Father look happy?" Ian commented.

Gregg chuckled. "You know, I was just thinking that very thing. I think Catherine will be good for his health. She has already brightened up our home. We've been too long without a female around here."

Nick's answer to that was a loud, angry laugh, then he turned sharply on his heels and stomped back inside the house to his study where he slammed the door for better emphasis. The echoing of his brother's laughter only made him more irate.

## Six

A leisurely wind blew through the trees, gently caressing the overhead branches that shaded the desolate country road. The afternoon weather was perfect for the ride. The air had warmed slightly since morning, making the sun a little easier for Catherine to take. Even her visit with Grant wasn't as nerve-wracking as she'd thought it would be. She talked to him like she used to as a child, and not once did she feel uneasy.

Since Grant couldn't guide the horses, she handled the reins in the two-seat buggy and led them down the road. At Grant's request, she pulled over, under the shade of a hickory tree. Her maid climbed out, but didn't wander away, giving her and Grant a little more privacy.

"I've always favored this part of the estate," he commented, squinting as he scanned the area. "I came here as a lad many times. Occasionally, your father joined me in a game of rock skipping in the pond over yonder." He pointed in the direction.

She laughed. "It sounds like such cherished memories. How long have you known my father?"

His attention moved back to her and he smiled. "Since I was very young. As you know, your father was our vicar's son. Although your father is strict now, there were many days both of us received a good scolding from our mothers."

"When did you meet my mother?"

For a moment, Catherine detected a solemn look in his light blue eyes, his mouth turned down in a frown. But as

quickly as it came, it disappeared and he smiled. "I met your mother when I was in my fifteenth year."

"How did you meet her?"

"She was the daughter of an Earl's second son, so she did not come from a family with wealth. Your father actually met her first, and then he brought her to meet me, here at this very spot." His gaze lifted to the sky.

"Tell me more," she urged.

He chuckled, turning his attention back to her. "You're full of questions today, aren't you?"

She shrugged. "I've always known you and my parents were friends, but they rarely talked about their youth."

His smile softened the longer he held her stare and unease began to take root inside her. She glanced at Emily. Would her maid be of assistance if Catherine needed her? But would Grant do anything improper with her maid so close?

"You know," he said, reaching out to stroke her cheek, "you resemble your mother quite a bit."

She nodded, hands clasped tight against her stomach.

"Your mother was just as beautiful in her younger years." He dropped his hand. "You have taken after her."

"You're most kind, Grant."

He remained silent as he kept his narrowed gaze on her. His attention roamed over every inch of her, from the top of her head, over her eyes and nose, coming to rest on her mouth. She tightened her hands around the reins, praying he wasn't thinking of kissing her. She wouldn't be able to handle that right now.

"Catherine, my dear, do you know what takes place in the bedroom between a man and wife? Did your mother talk to you about this before she died?"

She paused, taking a deep inhale before answering, "Yes, she briefly mentioned it." Remembering that confusing day, her cheeks heated. Her mother spoke of pain and a little blood, but Catherine couldn't figure out what it meant. Why did marriage have to be so violent?

"I want you to be ready for after the wedding. I don't want you to feel surprised with what naturally happens between married people."

Nodding, she forced herself to smile, all the while trying to calm the turbulent wave rolling in her stomach. This conversation wasn't proper—yet he was going to be her husband. Once again, the idea caused her stomach to churn. Fright consumed her, making her want to run.

The discussion she'd had with Nick popped in her mind, reassuring her Grant was an understanding man. If she'd open up her feelings to him, he'd understand. But she couldn't bring herself to say anything.

His hand moved behind her and he stroked her hair. The far away look in his eyes bothered her and she wanted to slap his hand away.

"Oh, Sophia," he muttered.

She jerked away from him, and at the same time pulled on the reins. The horses skirted in a half-circle, neighing out a protest. Suddenly, they lurched, and she slid on the seat, bumping into Grant. Emily ran over and grabbed the bridle of

one, trying to keep it from running. She cooed the animals until they stood still.

Grant fell against her and his pallor caught her attention. A deathly gray colored his skin and his eyes rolled back in his head. Against her, he was dead weight and his head flopped to her chest, freeing a couple of buttons in the process.

"Grant?" Her voice was unsteady. She shook his shoulders, but the movement just caused his head to drop to her lap. He lay very still.

"*Grant*," she screamed, but he made no sound.

Emily ran to her with wide eyes. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know." *Oh God! I killed him.* She quickly pushed him off her lap. Bending over him, she placed her ear to his chest, praying she'd hear a heartbeat. She detected a very weak pound. He might not live much longer. She had to get him back home.

Jumping out of the open carriage, she hurried to the horses. "Emily, help me untie this." She'd ridden bareback before, although it was many years ago. Once they had the animal untied, she pulled herself on his back. "Stay with His Grace. I'm riding to the house to get help."

Kicking her heels into his flanks, she pushed the animal to a run. She arrived at the house within minutes.

"Nick!" she yelled as she jumped down from the horse. She ran toward the front door. As she reached it, Nick pulled it open.

"Nick. Oh, Nick." She sobbed with relief as she grasped hold of his shirt at his chest.



Nick's body stiffened. "Catherine? What's happened? Where's my father?"

"Oh, Nick. I don't know what happened. The horses were out of control, then he lost consciousness." She let go of his shirt and grabbed his hands. "Come. You have to help. Quick, get your horse and follow me."

He ran to the stable and within minutes was atop his horse. Catherine mounted and led the way to the spot where his father lay slumped over in the vehicle. Once the buggy was in view, Nick rode ahead and reached his father before she did. He stopped his horse and jumped off, then ran over to Grant.

Nick pressed his ear to his father's chest. Several seconds passed when all she heard were her own uncontrolled breaths. Finally, Nick left his father's side and harnessed his horse to the carriage.

"Catherine?" he yelled over his shoulder. "You and Emily ride back home and send someone to fetch the doctor."

With her own heart beating wildly, she helped her maid mount behind her, then turned the horse and rode back to the house.

\* \* \* \*

Taking great care to push his father on the seat, Nick moved in beside him. Once he was able to adjust his father's weight to lean upon him, he whipped the reins, urging the horse forward, pushing his stallion as fast as it would run. When he reached home, he gently lifted his father out and carried him into the house, taking two steps at a time toward

Grant's room. Catherine, her maid, and his father's valet stood close to assist. The sheets on the bed had been pulled down.

"Gregg has gone for the doctor," Catherine told him.

Nick didn't say a word, but laid his father on the mattress. He removed Grant's over-jacket and loosened his neck-cloth. Catherine stood beside him to help, slipping off Grant's shoes and stockings. It was then that Nick noticed her state of dress. The top button of her riding jacket was undone, and wrinkles creased around her breasts. Now he knew why his father had an attack.

"How could you?" he snapped.

Catherine jumped. "What?"

"How can you stand there so innocently, knowing you were the reason my father had an attack?" He swept his gaze over her wrinkled clothes again.

Tears gathered in her eyes and she slowly shook her head. "Why are you saying this to me? Why would I want him to have an attack? I don't want him to die."

"Of course you do. You don't want to be tied down to an older, sick man, so you seduced him, knowing his heart wouldn't be able to take it when he started touching your body." He raked his gaze over her again. "You purposely allowed him to touch you, knowing full well what would happen."

Tears streamed down her face. "No, Nick. It wasn't like that. I didn't—"

"Quiet! I refuse to hear your lies."

"I'm not lying."

Turning back to his father, he tried ignoring her, but she grabbed hold of his arm. He pierced her with his angry stare.

"Damn it, Nick, will you please believe me? Why would I want him to touch me when I'm still very afraid of that? Things didn't happen the way you think."

"Women like you are all alike." He shrugged away from her touch and turned back toward his father, continuing to undress him. "Go downstairs and await the doctor."

Out of the corner of his eyes, he witnessed the drooping of her shoulders before she turned and left, her maid following.

Nick remained with his father until the doctor came, then made his way downstairs to wait with the others in the parlor. Although his brothers sat still on the sofa, Nick couldn't. He paced the floor, clenching and unclenching his hands. Catherine stood in a corner of the room, peering out the window. He tried not to acknowledge her presence.

How could she do that to his father? Earlier this morning he'd thought she was different from other women, but now he knew the truth. She was a schemer and liar, just like the rest of them. And to make matters worse, his body had reacted to her devilish state of dress when she came to get his help. She had looked so damn desirable. Her hair windswept, lips full, beckoning him to kiss them. But it was her rumpled clothes that made him want to take her in his arms and finish what they'd started last night. Beyond his control, his loins tightened. He silently cursed his weakened state.

He glanced her way. She'd changed into a prim day dress that didn't expose an inch of skin except for her face and hands. Her slightly swollen eyes gave evidence of her worry,

her lips pursed in a straight line. She sniffed back a tear, and Gregg jumped up from the sofa and rushed to her side.

*Such an actress.*

Footsteps from the hallway snapped Nick's attention to the door. The doctor walked into the room. Everybody turned his way. Nick stepped forward.

The doctor nodded. "Your father is conscious now, but he's resting. His sister, Lady Gertrude, is with him. He's had quite a setback and will probably be bedridden for at least another week before I'll allow him any activity. I don't want any undo stress put upon him. Is that clear? Also, absolutely no excitement."

Nick's gaze flew to Catherine. When she looked at him, he narrowed his eyes. She slowly lowered her head as more tears rushed down her cheeks.

Gregg and Ian moved to the doctor, each shaking his hand. "Thank you. We appreciate your time."

"Here's a sleeping solution that might help, although I'm certain because of your father's weakened condition, the medicine won't be needed."

Nick strode over to the doctor and shook his hand. "Thank you. Don't worry, we'll follow your instructions thoroughly."

Gregg and Ian walked with the doctor outside of the room. Catherine moved to follow, but Nick stopped her, stepping in front of her as he closed the door. When her gaze flew to his, he scowled.

"We'll follow the doctor's advice. I *will* make certain you don't excite my father."

Her breathing quickened, and her jaw hardened. She lifted her chin and faced him with her back straight.

"Yes, Lord Castledale. I'll follow the doctor's instructions. Although you seem to think this is all my fault, it's not and I'll do everything I can to help Grant recover from this setback." She glared at him. "Now, if you'll please remove yourself from my way, I would greatly appreciate it."

Her stubborn courage impressed him—almost. Most women didn't dare stand up to him with fire in their eyes, let alone, challenge him with their words. He stepped away from the door and swept his hand in front of him. "Go right ahead. I'm through with you for now."

"Thank you, my lord." She opened the door and with a stiff back and her head held high, marched out of the room.

\* \* \* \*

For the rest of the evening, and against the wishes of Mrs. Berkley, Catherine stayed with Lady Gertrude by Grant's side. He slept peacefully and probably didn't even know she was there. Yet, she wouldn't leave. She was out to prove to Nick she cared about Grant's health.

Off and on during the evening, Grant opened his eyes and smiled at her, then mumbled her mother's name. As good fortune would have it, nobody was in the room with her at this time, except for Gertrude. That woman wouldn't hear a cannon exploding if she stood right next to it. Besides, Catherine didn't know how she'd explain why Grant called her Sophia.

Nick stayed in the room most of the day. Catherine tried ignoring him the best she could, especially when his glare pierced right through to her heart. Each time this happened, her chest tightened a little more, heaviness settling inside.

He was such an inconsiderate donkey's back end. He'd blamed her for causing Grant's attack, yet wasn't it Nick who'd asked her to make his father happy in the first place? Nick, who was too bull-headed and stubborn to see past the end of his arrogant nose.

Catherine sat in the cushioned chair next to Grant's bed as she stitched one of her samplers. In the chair next to her, Gertrude held a book, but her gray head tilted back and her lips parted. Soft snores escaped her mouth. The room had been quiet for the longest time, so when Nick's voice boomed loudly, it made her jump. Gertrude continued to snore.

"Catherine, it's getting late. I think you should go to bed now. You need your rest."

Keeping a hardened expression on her face, she stubbornly lifted her chin. "I'm not tired. If you are, you're more than welcome to leave. You don't need to stay with me."

"Catherine," he warned, his voice turning harsh as he moved across the room toward her. "You're acting childish, and you need to learn when to obey authority."

She raised one of her eyebrows and threw his words back in his face. "Obey authority? From you, my lord?"

"Yes, me."

She looked back at her sampler. "I don't think so."

"*What?*" His voice rose higher. "You don't *think* so?"

"You heard what I said. I shouldn't have to repeat myself. I think the only deaf person in this room is Lady Gertrude."

"Listen, Miss Martin," he began sharply, but mumbling came from Grant and stopped him.

Both Nick and Catherine rushed to Grant's side as he stirred on the bed. Grant opened his eyes and looked from his son to her. "My loving Catherine and my devoted son are still by my side? Why is this? Do you not have anything better to do?"

"Of course not, Father." Nick walked around the other side of the bed and sat on the edge. He held his hand. "We enjoy being here and looking after you."

Catherine sat across from Nick and held Grant's other hand. "Is there anything I can get you?"

"No, I'm fine," Grant whispered. His eyes moved over Catherine for a moment, then he asked, "So, my dear, what are you planning on purchasing during your shopping trip to London tomorrow?"

"Oh, Grant, you cannot expect me to go to London when you are like this. I'll not do it."

Grant squeezed her hand. "I want you to go, my dear. You're too young and too full of life to be nursing me."

"Grant, no—"

"Catherine?" He cut her off. "Don't you want to make me happy?"

"Yes, of course I do." Although she kept her eyes on the weak man in bed, Nick's heated gaze burned holes through her.

"Then go shopping tomorrow. That will make me happy." Grant glanced over at Nick. "Make certain this beautiful woman is kept happy. Will you do that for me?" he pleaded, then moved Nick's hand and placed it over the top of Catherine's.

"Yes, Father," Nick answered softly. "I'll make certain she's taken care of."

Grant's eyes slowly closed. "Thank you," he whispered before drifting back to sleep.

Catherine dared to glance at Nick, and just as she expected, his glare made her cringe. Nick quickly removed his hand as if her skin was hot as coal. She casually returned to her chair and picked up her sampler as if nothing happened, although the heaviness in her heart spoke differently.

\* \* \* \*

Nick paced the carpeted floor, throwing fixed stares her way, trying to shoot invisible daggers into her soul. His life had been quite normal until this little *she-devil* entered. He wished he'd never laid eyes upon her or heard her name. She was nothing but trouble from the very beginning, and looking at her now sitting so prim and proper in her chair, acting like he wasn't bothering her, made him even more upset. She acted as if he'd been erased from her mind all together. Well, he'd make certain he left an imprint there to last a lifetime.

He moved to her and leaned down, his hands grasping each side of the chair, blocking her with his body. Her eyes jumped up and met his as she pulled her body back against the cushions. He leaned his face mere inches in front of hers.



The sweet fragrance of roses wafted around him, and her warm breath smelled like mint leaves.

"I'll have you know I *will not* play nanny to you tomorrow." He kept his voice low for his father's sake, also knowing his aunt wouldn't hear. "I'll take you to London and I'll bring you home, but I won't be your damn guardian and watch over you like a spoiled child."

Her eyes narrowed and she straightened her spine, which brought her face even closer to his. A fierce rhythm hammered in his chest from her nearness.

"My lord, I promise," she said slowly, "you won't have to watch over me like an infant. In fact, I'm vastly relieved you're not going to be near my side for the whole day because then I'm assured a pleasant outing."

*She did it again!* She actually stood her ground and didn't crumble in front of him. He almost admired her for that strength—almost.

"Good, so then we're in agreement about our plans for the morrow?"

"Yes."

He tried to stare her down, but she remained stubborn. The longer he stared into her dark violet eyes, the more he was drawn to her. He lowered his gaze to her stiff lips. Within seconds, her heart-shaped mouth relaxed, her lips parting.

When he looked back into her eyes, their color was softer, a pretty violet. His anger dissolved. Once again, confusion clouded his thoughts. He must stay angry or else her beauty might thwart him again.

"Damn you!" He pulled away and left the room.

\* \* \* \*

With a stretch and a yawn, Catherine awoke with the sun, but once she finally gained her bearings, she glanced around the room. *How did I get in bed?* She'd fallen asleep in her chair as she sewed, and vaguely remembered being picked up into somebody's strong arms and taken to her room, but by whom, she didn't know. She remembered Emily helping her undress before she climbed into bed, but that was all.

Dismissing her confusion, she arose and started her toiletries. Emily had a bath ready, and Catherine hurried through her wash and climbed out. She didn't want to relax in her activities this morning. She needed to get this day over with.

She wasn't looking forward to traveling with Nick, and just the thought made her hands sweat. She couldn't stand his angry looks and the mean words accompanying his moods. But most of all, she didn't like the way her body reacted so violently when he was near. And, the excitement that flowed through her was hard to explain.

Emily dressed her in a baby blue day dress with short bell-shaped sleeves. The round neckline of the bodice didn't show too much of her bosom, and the material fit snugly against her middle, accenting her full chest and slim waist. The dress was probably elegant enough for a duchess, especially when she added the white lace shawl and gloves. She also grabbed the matching bonnet. She wore her hair down and curly today, just pulling the sides away from her face, pinning them with pearl studded combs.

"I say, Miss Catherine," Emily said, "you're looking very lovely. I wish I could go with you and be the one to fight off the men who I'm certain will flock to your side."

Catherine chuckled. "I wish you were going also, but this afternoon will give me more time to get to know Lady Gertrude."

"Yes, it will. I think Mrs. Berkley wanted to go, but she's so stiff and sore this morning."

Catherine dared not laugh out loud. "I feel just awful for making her chase after me while I raced with Gregg and Ian. I'd forgotten Mrs. Berkley was not a horsewoman."

Emily stood back and grinned. "There you are, Miss Catherine. Have a pleasant trip."

"Thank you. I plan on making this day memorable." And she did, even if it meant ignoring Nick the whole time.

When she strolled into the dining room, only Gregg and Ian were seated at the table. *Nick's not here*. She sighed with relief.

"Good morning, Catherine." The brothers stood, cheerful smiles on their faces.

She smiled. "Good morning."

Gregg moved around and pulled out the chair for her. "What would you like for breakfast this morning?" he asked.

"Well, I'm really not very hungry, so maybe just some fruit."

Gregg signaled to one of the kitchen servants, and the maid hurried away to fetch Catherine a plate.

"How did you sleep last night?" Ian inquired.

"I slept well, but—" She paused, then hesitantly asked, "Did either of you take me to my room last night? I fell asleep in the chair while I was with your father, but I don't remember going to my room."

Both Ian and Gregg shook their head. "No, we were out late last night."

"Perhaps it was Nick," Gregg suggested.

"Yes, perhaps." She wanted to laugh. Nick help her? She doubted it. He could care less about her welfare, and he'd already shown her that touching her made him cringe.

As she ate, she focused on Gregg and Ian's discussion about their evening last night, which sounded to be quite entertaining. They talked about the poker game that took up their evening. The stakes were high and Ian was on a losing streak, but he was certain it wouldn't last all night. Good fortune was with Gregg, because he won most of the hands. Pretty soon, Ian's fate escalated.

Catherine forgot about her manners and leaned forward with her elbows on the table, eager to hear more of the story. But Nick strolled in the dining room and cleared his throat. Gregg and Ian ceased and everyone looked at Nick.

"Boys, I'm certain your conversation is something that shouldn't be discussed in front of a lady."

Disappointment washed over her and she frowned. The corner of Nick's lip tugged upward, and she thought he would laugh. But he straightened and put the scowl back on his face.

"Are you ready to go to London, Catherine?"

"Yes." She finished drinking her tea then stood.

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"Have an enjoyable time, Catherine," the brothers chimed as she walked out of the dining room with Nick. Lady Gertrude was descending the stairs, tying the bright green ribbons of her bonnet under her chin.

"Oh, Nick, I will so enjoy an outing into London." She reached Catherine and patted her hands. "And getting to know you a little better, of course."

Catherine smiled, until she met Nick's scowl. This was going to be one long ride.

## **Seven**

Catherine refused to meet Nick's eyes as he helped her in the waiting coach along the drive. Nick assisted his aunt inside, then climbed in and sat across from Catherine. After tapping on the roof of the carriage, it lurched forward.

Lady Gertrude's idle chatter hummed with the rhythm of the carriage wheels. Catherine, lifting her gaze from the passing scenery, noticed Nick had been quietly staring out of the window as well. The older woman seemed satisfied just to blabber like a magpie without hearing anything from the other two in the vehicle. Every so often, Catherine looked at Nick then quickly turned away. But his handsome appearance kept drawing her attention back.

Wearing a deep blue jacket with a black waistcoat, and his usual white silk blouse and black trousers, he appeared exceptionally dressed. It must have been the color from his jacket that made his eyes so dreamy, or was it the shadows inside the coach? It didn't matter. It was hard to keep her eyes off his lustrous form.

Catherine really didn't want to talk, but she couldn't see going all the way to London without speaking to him. She couldn't forget the way he treated her yesterday or the glares he gave her last night, but maybe she would be able to make him believe she didn't purposely try to hurt his father. He'd judged her harshly, and she would prove him wrong.

When Gertrude ended a topic, Catherine cleared her throat. His gaze swung and met hers.

"So, Lord Castledale," she began nicely, "what will you do while I'm shopping?"

He kept a solemn expression. "I'll probably spend most of the day at my office."

"What?" Lady Gertrude leaned her head closer to Nick, cupping her ear.

He repeated what he'd said, raising his voice.

"You have an office in London?" Catherine said, lifting her voice for Aunt Gertrude's sake.

"Yes."

"What do you do?"

"I own a couple of ships, and we're in the process of building another."

"Indeed? How amazing."

He grinned. "Why do you find it so amazing?"

She shrugged. "All I've heard about titled families is they do nothing but go to balls and gamble all the time. I was told all their money comes from wealthy inheritances."

Lady Gertrude snorted a laugh, then quickly brought her gloved hand to her mouth.

Nick chuckled. "Well, that's the way it is in most families, but the Fielding men have always had a head for business, except my brothers have yet to find their lot in life. My father may not have owned ships, but he has several businesses in London and even across the sea in America. I've built my own shipping business in the past three years, and my father has helped me out greatly. Just this year I had a hotel built in San Francisco, California, which is doing quite nicely."

Aunt Gertrude gasped. "San Francisco, California, did you say Nick?"

"Yes," he answered louder.

The older woman's hand flew to her throat. "There are heathens in that part of America. Why would you pick that place to build a hotel?"

"I'm not certain about the heathens, but there are many wealthy people who live there because of the gold rush."

Gertrude nodded.

Catherine cleared her throat and said loudly, "I'm relieved to know that the Fielding men are that way."

"Yes, and we've been doing that for many years, going back at least six generations."

"That *is* astonishing."

He was silent again as he turned his attentions out the window. He may not want to talk, but she wasn't about to ride all the way to London hearing only Lady Gertrude's voice.

"Um, my lord? I was wondering," she paused, not knowing how to ask the awkward question.

He looked back at her. "Yes?"

"Well, about last night. Did you—did you take me to my bedroom after I had fallen asleep?"

Lady Gertrude leaned toward Catherine. "What's that my dear?"

She fisted her hands underneath the folds of her skirt, not wanting to repeat it, but knowing she must. Once she did, Lady Gertrude's head snapped toward Nick, her mouth agape.

His face hardened. "Yes, I did. As much as I didn't want to, I couldn't see you sleeping in the chair and waking up stiff



and sore. Besides, my father would have been disappointed in me if I hadn't taken you back to bed."

Lady Gertrude let out a heavy sigh. "Oh, what a sweet boy you are."

Catherine nodded. "Yes, that was very considerate of you. I appreciate your kindness."

"You're welcome," he snapped.

"Lord Castledale?" she inquired again. "Do you always do everything your father asks of you?"

His eyes were wide when they met hers this time. "Of course. Why would you ask such a question?"

She shrugged. "I just noticed you're extremely loyal. He always asks you to do things, yet he doesn't ask your brothers. Why is that?"

"Because I'm the eldest. I'm the one who'll inherit the title and who'll possess the money. My brothers know this and they have accepted their place in the family and aren't relied upon by our father as I am."

"Don't you grow weary of it all?"

"Catherine, you don't understand." His voice turned edgy. "That's the way it's done. I live with it and accept my station in life. That's all. End of subject."

"I'm sorry if I've upset you. I don't know that much about the way of life you have led. It's so very different being raised a vicar's daughter. Then again, being a woman, things are different anyway. I was a good enough daughter, I guess, until I reached my fourteenth year," she ended softly.

He sighed heavily and sat back in his seat, folding his arms across his chest. "Why? What happened at fourteen that made you change?"

"Yes dear, tell us." The older woman patted Catherine's arm.

Nick's bland tone was different from his aunt's. Obviously, he really didn't want to know, but at least they were talking. Raising her eyes from her lap, she looked at him. "That was when my parents told me they intended to betroth me to your father."

He cocked his head. Even Lady Gertrude's eyes widened.

"What happened that day?" he asked.

"He came to visit my parents. On this particular trip, you and your brothers did not come. Before my parents said anything to me, your father took me for a walk and presented me with a ring." She held out her hand to show him the family heirloom around her finger. "He told me this was the ring that was passed down from mother to firstborn son. I was a little confused, but he slipped it on my finger, and that was when I understood. I was so upset, I went crying to my parents. They informed me Grant was to become my husband when I turned eighteen. That was the last time I talked to my parents, mainly because two days later I was sent to a finishing school."

Aunt Gertrude stroked her arm. "Catherine? Why were you angry with your parents for arranging your marriage?"

Nick's brows creased and he leaned forward in his seat, linking his fingers together across his knees as if waiting for her answer.

She couldn't tell them how she longed to marry the son—not the father. Lady Gertrude would certainly faint dead away. Catherine shrugged. "It's just not done any longer."

"Actually, my dear," the older woman said, "it's still done in most families."

Sighing, Catherine relaxed against the seat and stared out the window. "Yes, but it wasn't done in the little town where I grew up. All of my childhood friends picked their own mates. They had the chance to court and fall in love. My parents took that away from me." She blinked to fight away the tears threatening to come forth. "My parents didn't even ask my opinion. They went ahead with the arrangements and didn't consider my feelings." She turned back to him. "They were marrying me off for money and title, not the other way around. I'd rather be penniless and happily in love, than wealthy and never know love."

Nick leaned forward even more. "What about now? Do you still feel the same now that you've spent a little time with my father? Soon you will have all the money and prestige that you could possibly imagine."

She met his dark eyes without blinking. "Like I said, I'd rather be penniless and happily in love than wealthy and never know love."

\* \* \* \*

Nick dropped off Catherine and Aunt Gertrude at the dress shop before going to his office. He had mixed emotions about everything now, especially concerning Catherine. After she told him about the situation with her parents, not much was

said, but he had a lot to think about. He supposed she'd gotten all she'd wanted now, but she wasn't happy at all. The poor country girl wasn't what he figured her to be, and now he knew a little more about her and the way her mind worked, he doubted she purposely tried to hurt his father yesterday.

Maybe she wasn't to blame. Perhaps she had no idea his father was going to lose himself in passion. If the roles were reversed, Nick would have a hard time not kissing and touching her. Since his father hadn't done that kind of thing for awhile, maybe Grant did lose control.

Then again, he never did let her explain what had actually happened. He'd just assumed...

He squeezed his eyes closed and pinched the bridge of his nose. Imagining his father kissing her, or even touching her body sent cold chills up his spine. Why couldn't he stop these feelings? He should forget his childhood love and let his father have a bit of happiness before he died.

Nick growled and punched the seat. No matter what, he had to find a way to remove these emotions. She would never be his. Ever.

Nick met with his business partners and went over the books from the shipping company. Time flew and before he knew it, the lunch hour was upon him. He skipped breakfast and now his stomach growled, reminding him to eat.

Since he'd sent his carriage back for Catherine and Aunt Gertrude, he hailed a hackney to take him to White's. On the way, he passed a milliner's shop, and out in front was parked

his family's coach. Without a second thought, he ordered the driver to stop. He climbed out and hurried inside.

A few ladies mulled around, his aunt looked to be making her way through the store gossiping ... which was what she did best. In the back of the room, he spotted Catherine. Her beauty captured his attention. She talked with that old busybody, Lady Ruthaford. Catherine didn't see him. Neither did the older woman. He casually wove his way through the shop until he caught their conversation.

"I heard His Grace had a set back yesterday. Is he all right?" Lady Ruthaford asked.

Catherine's brow creased. "How did you hear that?"

"One of my servants is related to yours, and she mentioned it to my maid. It's just awful that he would have an episode this soon after your coming out ball."

"Yes, well, his health is improving."

"It's just so sad," Lady Ruthaford went on. "He waited all these years to introduce you, and now his heart goes and gives out on him."

"Yes, well—"

"But you, my dear, must be quite relieved," Lady Ruthaford continued. "I mean, you're very young and have your whole life ahead."

Catherine's mouth grew tight. "What are you implying?"

Lady Ruthaford waved her hand through the air. "Most of the *ton* know he's enamored with you. It will only be a matter of time before your betrothal is announced." She chuckled. "And when His Grace finally leaves this world, you'll be set for the rest of your life. You're one fortunate woman, Miss Martin."

Most wives have to live with their husbands a few years before the men meet their maker, but you might only have to tolerate him for a few months."

Catherine's eyes widened. Even her hands bunched into fists at her side. Red blotches appeared on her cheeks.

"Lady Ruthaford," Catherine began, her voice stern, looking her straight in the eyes. "For one thing, it's none of your business what kind of relationship I may or may not have with His Grace. And I'll have you know the Duke of Havenwood is a kind and gracious man, and if he has ten more years left, I may consider myself most fortunate to have known him that long."

Catherine paused, but only long enough to take a deep breath. "Now, Lady Ruthaford, I hope I'll not hear any more rumors about me or His Grace from you or any other ladies of the *ton*."

A smile bracketed Catherine's mouth as if nothing happened. "Have a pleasant day and I hope we meet again very soon." She turned, her manner graceful, and with her back straight and her head held high, she walked away from the old lady toward the hat racks where Aunt Gertrude stood.

Relief poured through him and pride burst in his chest. Catherine had actually stood up to society's notorious gossipmonger. In all of his life, nobody had ever told old Lady Ruthaford to mind her own business. He grinned, and his respect for Catherine grew.

Old hatchet face Ruthaford hurried out of the shop with a red face. Probably out to spread more gossip.

He waited until Lady Ruthaford's carriage passed by the shop's window before he sneaked outside. He leaned against the brick wall and waited. Within seconds, Catherine walked out and over to the coach, but instead of climbing in, she stood still as if in a daze.

He walked up behind her. "Well done, Miss Martin," he said softly over her shoulder.

She jumped, swung around and faced him. Her cheeks turned a bright pink and she brought her hand to her throat. "Well done? For what?"

Nick smiled. "For putting that old hag in her place and sticking up for my father."

"You ... heard?"

He chuckled. "Oh yes, and it's a damn shame my father wasn't here to hear it also."

"Well, I—I—"

"No need to explain. I know why you did it."

\* \* \* \*

Catherine folded her trembling hands against her fluttering stomach. Her heart didn't beat out of control because of the encounter with old lady what's-her-name, it was from the tenderness displayed on Nick's face. His eyes were a softer blue and his face more relaxed than she'd ever seen. He'd never looked so handsome.

"Why did I do it?" she asked softly.

"Because you love him."

She nodded. "I've loved him as my parents' friend and confidant for so long, it's hard to stop."

"Yes, I know."

There was silence for a few minutes as they just stood staring at each other. Her heart lodged in her throat, making it difficult to breathe. His eyes softened the longer his gaze held hers. This incredible spell had to be broken before she swooned ... or fell into his arms.

She cleared her throat. "What are you doing here? Is it time to leave?"

He smiled. "No. I thought you might be hungry and enjoy having lunch with me."

Her smile widened. "Yes. I would." She glanced over her shoulder. "Lady Gertrude should be here shortly. She was detained."

He stepped over to the coach, opened the door for her and helped her inside. Within minutes, Lady Gertrude rushed out of the shop and Nick helped her in. The older woman sat across from her this time. As Nick settled himself next to Catherine, her heart hammered against her ribs. The musky scent of spice wafted through the air and made her stomach flutter. She tried to keep from touching him, but a few times the vehicle rocked and jostled her into him. She quickly apologized and scooted over.

The inn where Nick took Catherine and Lady Gertrude reminded Catherine of the last eating establishment she'd visited, except this one was a hundred times nicer and the serving women dressed with much more modesty. And they didn't flirt with Nick.



After their plates of food came, Nick began the conversation. "So tell me, Catherine, what have you purchased so far today?"

She took a swallow of her drink before answering. "Well, I've ordered a few dresses from Madame La Fonté, but other than that, I really haven't bought much."

He almost choked on his food. "What? That's all? Where did you learn to shop?"

"I've never really learned, but the truth is, I wasn't having much fun."

"Are you jesting?"

"No."

"Well then, Miss Martin, I think it's time to learn how to have fun."

She laughed. "And pray tell, who's going to teach me?"

"Why, the Marquis of Castledale, that's who."

She widened her eyes. "You? But don't you have business to attend?"

He waved his hand. "I have finished it, and now the rest of the day is yours."

Lady Gertrude clapped her hands. "Splendid. We'll have a wonderful time."

It amazed Catherine how much fun she had with Nick. He was such a charming man, and he knew how to laugh and have a good time, which surprised her greatly. When she'd gone shopping earlier, her time with Lady Gertrude had been all right, but now it was as if her day had just began.

Nick took her back to Madame La Fonté and helped pick out another dozen dresses, which she really didn't think she

needed, but Nick assured her she did. He also helped Madame La Fonté chose the right colors to match her eyes and her complexion. Madame La Fonté clung to Nick's every word as if he were God, and it surprised Catherine he was respected and admired as much as he was—and in a women's dress shop, no less.

After they were finished there, Nick took her to another place, one that Catherine didn't think he should be in. Even Lady Gertrude turned three shades darker. But Nick acted just as comfortable there as he did with Madame La Fonté. Although it made her extremely uncomfortable for Nick to be giving advice about ladies undergarments, she soon became accustomed to it and didn't blush whenever he made a suggestion.

From there, he took her back to the milliner, then to the shoemaker. He took her to the perfume shop where he helped her pick out the rose scent she liked to wear. Then they moved from place to place, up and down the streets of London until Nick was satisfied that she had purchased enough items.

In each shop there was always a woman who knew him. By the way they clung to his arm and batted their eyes, Catherine received the impression those women knew him intimately. A few of them even dared to kiss him, even though he turned his cheek. His mistress, perhaps?

She tried to act as if she hadn't seen the brief contact made by these women, but her anger rose and she literally had to bite her tongue as not to yell at them to keep their hands off him. Yet, she had no right to feel possessive.

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No right at all.

## **Eight**

Evening came and Nick escorted Catherine and Lady Gertrude to the club for dinner. This establishment was for men only, but they did allow women in the dining area. He enjoyed watching her wide eyes as they entered, knowing this was her first time in a place like this.

After they were seated and Nick ordered for them, he returned his attention to Catherine. She looked so sensual in the chandelier's light, and he couldn't take his eyes off her.

"Nick? Is this where Gregg and Ian were last night, during their poker game?" she asked.

Lady Gertrude choked on her drink and gasped. Nick patted his aunt's hands. "No need to fear, Auntie. I stopped my brothers before they could tell Catherine any more." He lifted his voice so she could hear.

The older woman breathed slower and took another swallow of her drink.

Nick gave Catherine a nod. "This is the place. But, Catherine, they really shouldn't have told you what went on inside."

She creased her forehead. "Why? Is it against the law?"

He chuckled. "No, it's just not a proper thing to discuss with women."

She sipped her tea. "Why?"

He laughed again. "I don't know why, it just falls under the rules of propriety."

She nodded and was silent for a few seconds, then asked, "But what if I wanted to know anyway? The story your brothers told was quite interesting."

God, she was so lovely—so innocent. "But it's just not done, my dear."

Sighing heavily, she frowned. "Well, if you ask me, I'd say those rules are silly. Isn't it bad enough we aren't allowed in your little clubs? And now, we can't even hear about what goes on inside."

"Yes, I suppose it is rather silly."

Sitting forward, she leaned her elbows on the table and looked him square in the eye, their violet color twinkling. "Then will you tell me a story or two, during our ride home? I won't tell anyone, I promise."

His heart softened. "Maybe, on our way home."

She sat back in her chair and grinned.

Nick couldn't keep his eyes off her while they ate, and couldn't stop the smile sneaking upon his face. Unbelievable, but he was having a pleasant time with her—once she had loosened up and relaxed anyway.

Catherine had a good sense of humor and made him laugh too many times to count. Even more so now than when they were children. He enjoyed her charm and wit, and he loved the way her eyes sparkled, and the way her smile lit up her face when she laughed. He really hated to end this day, but the time slipped away quicker than he wanted. Night was upon them, and the time to return home.

As he waited at their table for Aunt Gertrude to finish visiting with an old acquaintance from across the room, he turned to Catherine and smiled. "May I ask you a question?"

"Of course. What would you like to know?"

"Why didn't you enjoy yourself this morning when you were shopping? Wasn't my aunt enjoyable company?"

She shrugged. "Well, it was different with her. People treated me differently."

His brows drew together. "Like how?"

"You witnessed the scene between Lady Ruthaford and myself. Most of the women I ran into were like that, but they weren't as blunt. And then the men..." she trailed off.

He scowled and fisted his hands underneath the table. "What did the men do?" Anger welled up in his chest and spread throughout him, and yet she hadn't even told him. He already knew the answer. He was, after all, considered in the same class as these men.

"You were right when you told me to beware. Remember? At my ball?"

He nodded. "I told you these men thought of you as their next conquest."

"Yes. They seem to think I'm looking for a man, just because, um, just because..."

"Because my father is ill and an older man," he finished for her.

"Exactly, and I didn't know how to handle the situation."

"You handled Lady Ruthaford just fine."

She grinned. "Indeed?"

He nodded.

"But she was the one person who ate away at my patience. The others, well, I politely told them I was very happy staying with Grant and his family."

His temper lifted a notch. "Who are these men? I'll find them and call them out."

"No, Nicholas." She reached over and touched his hand. "Let it be, all right? No harm was done."

"Only to my family's name."

She shook her head. "I think I led them astray."

His anger cooled slightly from the soft touch of her hand and the warmth of her skin against his. "But they'll be back. You are very attractive and they think my father unable to keep you happy. What will you do then?"

"They will not. I have three older brothers to protect me." She squeezed his fingers.

He turned his hand and clasped onto hers. "But, Kitty, you don't understand. I'm just like those men. I know exactly how they think."

She inhaled quickly, but didn't pull her hand away.

"Are you indeed? Are you like that?" she asked softly, not taking her eyes off his.

"What if I told you yes? What if I told you my reputation is deplorable?" His thumb moved across her knuckles in a caress. "Remember what I told you the night of your ball when we were on the stairs?"

A pink tint colored her cheeks. "Yes."

"All that's true, my sweet. I'm not considered a gentleman. I'm a rake, a womanizer, a defiler of innocents."

She swallowed. "Then, why are you sought after by all the respectable young ladies?"

He chuckled. "I'm in line to be the next duke. Because of my title and wealth, along with my age and my looks, I'm considered a great catch, notorious rake or not."

She nodded. He continued to caress her knuckles with his thumb, and he didn't want this coziness between them to end.

"But would you go after a young married woman just because her husband was old and ill?"

He arched an eyebrow. "Yes. Especially if she were as lovely as you."

She licked her lips, and her hand trembled. He'd unnerved her again. God help him, he liked that feeling.

"Then it's a good thing you're Grant's son, isn't it? And I'm also glad you'll protect me from men like yourself."

He released her hand and sat back in his chair, trying to calm his fiercely beating heart. He couldn't believe what he'd just said and done. Worse than that, immoral images filled his head and he actually wanted to take her out to the coach and seduce her. The thought never even crossed his mind that she was his father's fiancée ... until now. How could he forget such a vital piece of information?

Damn, he needed a stronger drink—something that could get him the rest of the way home and keep him from going mad in the process.

"Catherine, I need to leave you for a few minutes, but I'll be back soon, and then we'll return home."

"Where are you going?"



"Inside the club. I need to see if a certain man is in there. I won't be long." He stood, and rushed inside, hoping to cool his overheated loins.

\* \* \* \*

The ride home was miserable.

Not only did it seem bumpier than before, but no matter what Nick tried to do, he couldn't close his eyes and fall asleep. He also couldn't talk to Catherine. When they'd spoken at dinner, it turned so personal and he couldn't ignore the heated emotions coursing through his body as he caressed her hand and gazed into her intoxicating eyes.

During the ride home, he tried to act as if he were asleep, only because he didn't want to talk with her. He was afraid the conversation would turn personal again, and he'd want to pursue his lustful thoughts ... even though his aunt was with them. Of course Lady Gertrude sat next to him in the corner of the vehicle, her head tilted back and mouth opened as soft snores escaped her throat.

When he remembered the way Catherine had held his hand at the dinner table tonight, pleasurable shivers shot throughout his body as sexual hunger grew inside him. Going inside the club for a stronger drink didn't help either. When he'd escorted her to the coach afterward, fire still consumed his body. And when he'd touched her to help her inside, the heat had intensified.

Across the coach from him, Catherine looked as if she, too, tried to rest. The vehicle bumped her all over the seat, making it impossible for her to stay still. The longer she

bounced around, the more he wanted to move next to her so she could have something to lean up against the rest of the way home.

Finally, his conscience won and he moved over. She jumped and looked at him. Without explanation, he sat back in the corner and draped his arm around her shoulders, inviting her to lean against his body. Her eyes were wide at first, but then she relaxed into him as her head rested against his shoulder.

He tried to unwind, but her nearness and heavenly scent drifted through his nostrils, making it impossible. She was just too damn soft and smelled too good to even think of being tranquil. Although he wanted to make her more comfortable, he was now the one ill at ease. Maybe he should've stayed on the other side of the coach. Too late. Nothing could move him now.

He itched to touch her in a purely erotic way. She hadn't put on her shawl, so it would be easy to slide his fingers across her shoulder, over the bare skin at her neck and toward her perky breasts...

Slowly his hand drifted to her arm and moved up and down her skin in a soft caress. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, praying she would stop him. The Lord knew he didn't have the strength to do it himself. He'd thought about doing this to her for too many years. Heaven help him, but he wanted his dreams to come true.

\* \* \* \*

Catherine thought it was difficult to rest before, but now it was utterly impossible. Although her eyes were closed as her head rested against the crook of his shoulder, her mind was wide-awake. The sensations spiraling through her body as his hand touched the skin on her arm just below her sleeve, were almost too much for her to handle. Yet she didn't want him to stop. She'd imaged this for too long.

She enjoyed the way her body burned when he sat this close to her, and especially when he touched her. His tender caress lulled her mind and body, but not toward rest. He brought her body alert, more than it'd ever been before.

Hesitantly, she moved closer and rested her hand on his chest. His arm tightened around her, and underneath her palm, the erratic beat of his heart matched the rhythm of hers. Her breathing turned harsh and shallow. His sounded the same.

She couldn't stand any more of this silence. Something needed to happen or needed to be said soon to break the incredible mood.

"Nicholas?" Her voice shook.

"Yes?" His was deep.

Now what should she say? "I—I wanted to let you know I had a wonderful time with you today. Thank you for teaching me how to shop."

"The pleasure was all mine."

Silence, once again. Why didn't he want to talk? But she wouldn't give up.

"Did you find the man you needed inside the club tonight?" she asked in a whisper, hoping not to wake Lady Gertrude.

"Yes." His voice remained low, too.

"Who was it?"

"One of my business partners."

"Oh."

His chest shook as if he were laughing. "Catherine, I haven't been honest with you. I didn't go into the club to see anyone. I went inside to get a drink—or two ... of whiskey."

Moving slightly, she lifted her head to look at him. He was closer now, and the dim light from the lantern made his eyes so intoxicating ... so irresistibly dreamy.

"Why did you need a strong drink?" she asked.

His gaze softened. "To help me get my mind off a certain woman."

Catherine was drawn to him like a moth to flame. His heated gaze had hypnotized her. She didn't want to move.

"Why?" she asked again.

He stroked the pad of his thumb across her bottom lip. Tingles cascaded over her body. She wanted to sigh and lean into him. And Lord help her ... she wanted to kiss him.

A lazy smile touched his mouth. "Why do you ask so many questions? Don't you know when to keep your tempting mouth closed? Do you know what you do to me every time you open those luscious lips of yours?"

Her heart jumped to her throat and she could hardly breathe, but right now, she didn't care. All she wanted was one thing, and talking wasn't it. "What's that? What do I make you want to do?"

Groaning, he brought his mouth down and covered hers. She sucked in a quick breath, but when his arms circled her

body, she leaned into him. The kiss wasn't rough, just extremely wild, especially when the pecking turned into more and he slid his tongue inside, touching her wet, hot tongue.

Timidly she caressed his back and he groaned. His embrace was strong and tight, almost as if he were afraid she'd leave. But she did exactly the opposite. She pushed her body into his and moved her hand up his chest and around his neck. Threading her fingers through his hair, she caressed its silkiness.

The kiss softened but turned more passionate. Heated tingles multiplied and danced over her skin. Inside her, the inferno built inch by incredible slow inch. She enjoyed the way his mouth fit over hers, and the way his tongue touched hers. Meeting his kisses, she tried to please him as much as she could, basking in the passion he gave.

Nick's hands drew circles on her back and caressed up and down her bare arms. Within seconds, his hand changed direction and moved from her arm to her neck, touching her. The frantic rhythm of her heart beat against his palm. This was wrong, but she couldn't stop him ... not yet.

Sliding his hand slowly down her neck, he caressed her exposed skin and stroked the slight curves of her breasts. She tried to control her ragged breathing, but it was impossible. By the direction of his hand, she knew where it headed ... and she wanted it to reach its destination.

When his palm rested fully over her breast, a moan escaped her throat and she shivered. She arched into his hand, wanting to experience more of the turbulent waves of passion soaring through her.

He trailed his lips from hers down her jaw to her neck, and down further to the swelling of her bosom, leaving light feathery kisses. His hand cupped and caressed her breast tenderly through her dress. The heat within her built to a roaring fire, and Lord help her she wanted more.

"Ahhh, Nicholas."

"What?" His hot breath breezed across her bosom, very close to his bold hand still fondling her.

"Please..."

"God, Kitty, you're so passionate."

Frantically, his other hand searched for the buttons at the back of her dress, but they fumbled in opening her gown. Then, the coach stopped.

Nick pulled away and turned to tug back the curtain on the window. He heaved a heavy groan, then quickly moved away from her to the other side of the coach.

Her heart sank. They were home.

Losing his nearness was what snapped Catherine out of her passionate state of mind. She glanced at Lady Gertrude, who thankfully, hadn't moved.

She looked at Nick, but he wouldn't meet her eyes. His forehead was creased, his lips in a straight line. *Oh, no.* She'd made him mad again. But could she blame him? Look at the way she acted, and she would be marrying his father, no less.

After the coachman opened the door, Nick climbed out then offered his hand for Catherine and helped her down.

"What about Lady Gertrude?" she asked.

"Not to worry. I'll wake her. You go ahead inside."

The coachman carried Catherine's packages up to her room where her maid took over. Emily helped Catherine undress into her nightgown, then the maid left the room. Catherine sat at her vanity table and stared at herself in the mirror as she brushed her long hair.

Memories of the day and especially the night played through her head, and she could see how she ended up in Nick's arms while he kissed her passionately. It was almost inevitable, yet it shouldn't have happened, nor should it ever happen again.

It wasn't really his fault. It was hers. If she didn't have those tingling sensations every time he touched her then maybe she wouldn't fall so easily into his arms. But on the other hand, if he hadn't flirted with her the way he had, and said the things he'd said, then maybe she wouldn't feel this way about him.

A knock rapped upon the door.

Without getting up, she called out, "Come in." In her state of confusion, she wondered why Emily knocked in the first place.

Placing her head in her hands, she squeezed her eyes closed while her fingers massaged her temples. How could she avoid another situation like tonight when she longed to be with Nick, but knew she couldn't?

"I see you feel the same way about this evening as I," Nick said in a brusque voice.

She jumped and swung in her seat to face him. His jacket and waistcoat were gone, and his white silk shirt was unbuttoned halfway down his front, revealing a muscular

chest lightly sprinkled with black hair. Her heart hammered against her ribs, and her hands itched to touch him.

"What ... do you ... mean?" Her voice squeaked.

"I mean you look just as torn apart as I feel. Should I assume you're regretting the actions that were taken tonight in the coach?"

She lowered her gaze to the floor. "Yes, I feel guilty about what happened."

"Good. I'm relieved I'm not the only one who's miserable."

She took a deep breath, stood and faced him. The low fire from the hearth behind her warmed her limbs. "Nick, you must believe I'm very sorry about what happened—"

He took five steps and was in front of her, grabbing her arms and pulling her against his body. "Catherine—" He groaned in between clenched teeth. "You have to learn what things can excite a man and not do them in front of me."

The tone of his voice and the strained look on his face frightened her. "I ... I ... don't understand."

His eyes softened as his gaze roamed over her face then down to her gown. "I can practically see through your gown, and I like what I see." His eyes met hers again as he cupped her breast.

She moaned and leaned into him, pressing her face against the skin at his neck, breathing in his masculine, spicy scent. She brushed her lips against him until he groaned. He pushed her back enough to lower his mouth to hers.

Her deep sigh of pleasure mixed with his heavy breath as they kissed. His tongue swept through her mouth once before



his kiss trailed down her neck. She tilted her head and gave him more access.

He wrapped his arms around her, practically crushing her body against his. Lifting her, he brushed his face against her chest until his mouth made contact with a pointy nipple. She moaned and clung to his head.

As quick as it began, he set her back on her feet and stepped away. "Stop it, Kitty!" His voice turned harsh and he raked his hands through his hair. "Stop seducing me. I don't like these games, and you'll soon find out if you play with me, I play to win."

Tears gathered in her eyes and she shook her head. "Nick, I still don't know why you're angry with me right now. What am I doing wrong?"

He closed his eyes. "You're doing nothing wrong, yet everything you do is wrong."

Groaning, he bent his head and kissed her mouth roughly, then as quickly as it started, he stopped and stepped away. "Damn you, Catherine. You really need to learn what pleases a man and not do them to me, but to my father instead."

His gaze roamed over her body once again, then he turned and walked toward the door. Before he opened it, he barked out harshly, "Stay away from me. Do you understand? I don't want you near me ever again." He opened the door and stormed out.

She stood frozen, yet her body shook from the brief, passionate moment. The tears gathering in her eyes broke through the dam and fell down her cheeks. She ran over to the bed and flung herself upon it as she sobbed.

Always, My Love  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

"Damn it, damn it, damn it!" she cursed, hitting her pillow as she cried harder. Why was life so complicated?

## Nine

Nick was characteristically absent for the next week, and as each day passed, Catherine's chest tightened. No matter how early or how late she stayed up, she could never see him. It was as if he'd disappeared. She'd given his valet a message from her, but that was days ago. And she still hadn't heard from Nick.

Gregg and Ian kept her entertained the best they knew how, but it wasn't the same. However, she accompanied them on horseback for rides around the estate.

Today's weather made riding perfect. She pulled on her gloves and tightened her bonnet before joining them out by the stables. Mrs. Berkley sat straight on her mount, chin erect. Her ever-present, arched-brow gaze followed Catherine.

Gregg helped Catherine onto her horse, then the four of them set out.

They trotted for the first little while, then their ride became faster. Once again, Mrs. Berkley trailed behind, being hit in the face from the dust kicked up from the horses.

Catherine grinned as she caught up to Gregg. He glanced at her over his shoulder and gave her a wink.

"Dare to race me?"

She shook her head. "I fear Mrs. Berkley will resign her post and never speak to me again."

He glanced back at the older woman. "I don't believe she will. She hasn't left yet, and it's not because you haven't really tried either."

She laughed. "Lord Gregg, you're simply horrid." She reached over and slapped his arm.

He joined in with the humorous situation, but within seconds, joy left his face and worried lines creased his brow. Gripping the reins, he tugged, urging the horse to stop.

When his saddle slipped, she realized his concern. She yanked on her reins to slow beside him. Reaching out, she grasped his arm. The saddle slipped more and he slid to the right.

"Gregg," she screamed.

He jerked the reins one last time and finally the horse stopped ... but then the saddle moved again. Gregg's fingers fumbled to grab onto hers, but he lost his grip and fell. His body hit the ground with a loud thud.

"*Gregg!*" She jumped off her horse and ran to his side.

"I'm all right." He groaned, pulling himself upright.

Ian rode up beside them. "What the hell happened?"

"My saddle wasn't on tight." Gregg stood and dusted off his trousers.

"How in the hell..." Ian climbed off his steed and hurried to check Gregg's saddle.

Catherine linked her arm through Gregg's and gave him a shaky smile, her heartbeat still rattling her chest. "You'll tell me if you're not all right, won't you?"

He caressed her cheek. "No, but thank you for your concern." He chuckled. "Really, Catherine, I'm fine. No damage done—except to my ego."

Ian laughed. "And that's worse than a broken bone, isn't it, Gregg?"

She took a deep breath and tried to breathe normally. Mrs. Berkley rode next to them and stopped. "What's amiss?"

Catherine pulled away from Gregg and moved over to her companion's side. "Gregg's saddle slipped. Nothing to worry about."

"Except for the fact that it's been purposely cut," Ian remarked.

Catherine gasped, her hand flying to her throat. Ian pointed to the proof. Jagged edges in the leather showed where someone had tried to cut it with a knife.

Ian looked at Gregg. "Ride home with me and we'll have the groomsman inspect this."

As the foursome made their way back to the house, Catherine gripped the reins so tight her fingers tingled with numbness. Why would someone want to purposely harm Gregg? It just didn't make sense.

Mrs. Berkley insisted Catherine return to her room to relax after the exciting morning, so she did. For the rest of the afternoon and most of the evening, she couldn't get Gregg's accident off her mind. Her main goal had been to relax, and since that didn't work, she became restless. Soon, boredom threatened to make her go insane. She had to get out.

She opened the door and looked toward Mrs. Berkley's room. Silence stretched in the hallway, so she tiptoed to Grant's room.

He lay in his bed, his eyelashes fluttered, but she knew he couldn't see her. Lady Gertrude nodded and smiled at her.

Letting out a heavy sigh, Catherine moved beside Grant's bed and straightened the blanket. His sister had been reading to him, but she set the book down on her lap.

"Gertie?" Grant reached his hand out and bumped into Gertrude's knee, bringing the older woman's focus his way.

"Yes, dear?"

"If you're tired, go to bed. You don't need to keep me entertained."

"Oh, posh." She rolled her eyes. "I'm doing it for my benefit, too."

Catherine grinned, then quickly hid it by covering her mouth with her hand.

His gaze moved around the room. He couldn't see her, obvious by the blank nothingness in his eyes.

"Where's Elizabeth?"

Catherine's heart sank. He'd called her that name the other day. At least it wasn't Sophia's name this time.

Gertrude touched his shoulder and chuckled. "Grant, dear. Elizabeth is dead, don't you remember? She died due to complications from Ian's birth."

He shook his head. "But she was here just a moment ago."

Gertrude glanced over her shoulder and looked at Catherine, sadness filling her eyes. "No, Grant. Perhaps you're thinking about Catherine. She's here."

Grant blinked, then nodded. "That's correct. Catherine? Where are you?"

"I'm here." She stepped around to the side of the bed. When she came into his view, his eyes widened along with his smile.

"How are you, my sweet?"

She took his hand. "I'm well this evening."

He shook his head. "What's wrong with you two women? Don't you have anything better to do than to take care of me?"

Gertrude laughed, but Catherine could barely manage a smile. Why didn't she have stronger feelings for the man she'd soon marry? *Because I'm in love with his son.*

"Grant, dear?" Aunt Gertrude asked. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes. I'm famished."

"I'll go inform Cook." She stood and waddled to the door, her hand pressed to the small of her back.

"My sweet?" He reached for Catherine and she grasped his hand. "Would you come back to me tonight?"

"Of course I'll return. When Lady Gertrude is ready, I'll be right by her side. I've visited you every night and will continue to do so until—"

"No, my dear," he cut her off. "I'd like you to stay the night with me, in my bed."

She sucked in a breath, her heart plummeted to her knees. Suffocation tightened her chest. "But ... but that's improper. There's no way I could—"

"I don't care about priority," he stopped her. "I want to be with you again before I die." He paused. "Please, Sophia?"

Bile rose in her throat and her stomach churned. Once again, he thought she was her mother. And what was he talking about—again?

*Oh God! My mother and Grant were intimate.*

Tears stung her eyes, and although he wouldn't see, she blinked to hold them from releasing. Although Grant wanted her mother, could she refuse what may be his last wish? Especially when his health declined quickly. The physician didn't even know how long Grant would live.

They weren't betrothed, although she suspected most of the ton knew they would be. So although it would be wrong, it would also be acceptable.

It had fallen on her shoulders to make him happy. He'd always spoiled her as a child, and now she should return his kindness. She may not love him as a wife, but she did love him as a friend—no matter if he looked upon her as her mother. His illness certainly wasn't helping him decipher between the two any longer.

Her heart heavy, she swallowed the lump of fear. "Yes, Grant. I'll return."

Her voice broke, and before she embarrassed herself and cried in front of him, she turned and hurried out. With every step to her room, tears streaked down her cheeks and blurred her vision. She entered and closed the door behind her.

She rushed to the balcony door and flung it open. The cool night air touched her skin, but it didn't calm her stomach. She closed her eyes and breathed slowly as the light wind brushed her face and teased her hair.

Had she made the right decision? But it was the only decision. He was the man she was supposed to marry. This had to be done—and physically becoming Grant's betrothed in every way just might take Nick out of her thoughts.



She stayed in her room and partook of the evening meal in private. She didn't want to explain to Gregg and Ian why her eyes were red and puffy. And why she couldn't smile. She couldn't tell them she was about to give her virginity to a man she didn't love. Would never love.

Once the maid took her meal away, she curled on her bed and crushed a pillow to her chest. On the wall hung the painting of a garden, but the peaceful scene did nothing to calm her nerves or her rolling stomach.

Shadows moved and soon night completely took over. Emily bustled into the room with a lantern. When the maid saw her on the bed, she stopped.

"Miss? What's wrong? Are you unwell?"

*In more ways than one.* "No, Emily. I'm just not in the socializing mood."

"Oh. Well, Mrs. Berkley is quite put out with you for not making an appearance at the supper table tonight."

Catherine shrugged. "She'll get over it. Besides, why isn't she up here talking to me herself?"

Emily giggled. "I think she's still upset with you for what happened during the horserace with Lord Gregg and Lord Ian."

A grin tugged at the corner of her mouth, but she quickly stopped it. This was definitely not a time for humor. "I'm certain she'll have to overcome that episode also."

"Would you like me to draw your bath?"

"Yes. Thank you, Emily."

Sleepwalking would best describe the way Catherine floated through the next little while as she bathed and then

prepared to dress for the night. When she instructed her maid to retrieve the sheer bridal nightgown, Emily didn't raise an eyebrow.

The material slid down Catherine's body, stroking every inch of her. Instead of feeling excitement, fear knotted in her stomach.

As she stared at herself in the vanity mirror, heat consumed her cheeks. She picked up a brush and ran it through her damp hair. The small fire from the hearth helped to dry it. The daring bodice did very little to hide her bosom, and the see-through sleeves didn't hide her skin well either. Between her breasts rested a pink ribbon, designed to draw the eye to the deep cleavage.

Could she actually go through with it without her stomach churning? And if she did, would Grant's heart survive? Was his body strong enough to make it? If he died tonight, Nick would never forgive her.

Emily mumbled something about going to get her some tea and quickly left the room. From out in the hallway, the grandfather clock chimed the late hour. A piece of wood popped in the fireplace. And if she listened closer, she'd probably hear her heart crying out for someone to rescue her. Yet she couldn't stop the inevitable from happening. This was the only way.

She must push Nick from her mind and allow Grant to enter. Even if her future husband thought of her mother, being with him tonight must be done.

The door opened and closed, but she didn't look away from her saddened expression in the reflection. "Emily? Could you

please get my robe and lay it on the bed for me?" She stood and walked toward the fireplace, continuing to pull the brush through her hair.

Footsteps came behind her, but were too heavy to be her maid's. Her heartbeat quickened and she froze. Only one man had ever entered her room, and she didn't need to turn to see who it was. His scent of spice and tobacco surrounded her, making her knees weak. On their own accord, her nipples hardened. Inwardly, she moaned.

She couldn't turn and face him wearing this nightgown. He'd certainly not hesitate to give her a verbal lashing as he had last time. If he'd thought the other gown showed him parts of her body she shouldn't display, he'd definitely not approve of this one. She crossed her arms over her chest.

He moved and stood behind her, but didn't speak. The only sound in the room came from his deep breathing and her heart knocking against her ribs. A hint of liquor came from his breath. Her heart fluttered. He'd smelled this way that night in the coach on the way back from London.

After a few minutes of silence, she finally spoke. "Where—" Her voice cracked, so she cleared her throat and started again. "Where have you been these past seven days?"

"You've been counting?" His voice came out deep, seductive.

"I've been waiting to speak with you, but you were never around."

He rested his hands on her shoulders, his thumbs moving in a soft caress. "I've just barely received your message."

"I sent that message almost a week ago."

"I've been in London staying in my townhouse." There was a pause, then he asked, "What did you need, my sweet Kitty?"

Her heart thumped in a fierce rhythm, and still she didn't dare turn. She should have put on her robe. "Nicholas? Could you please bring me my robe? I believe it's in my bathing chamber."

His footsteps moved away into the other room, then he was back. The silkiness of the robe touched her back and shoulders as he helped her put it on. She turned slightly, slipping one arm in, then the other. She reached to pull the robe together, but he held onto the material and stepped closer, his arms circling around from behind when he brought the robe together. His hands were very near her breasts and she inhaled through her nose.

His hot breath whispered across her neck. She squeezed her eyes closed. Was he looking down her body? The heat radiating from him sent shivers throughout her, immobilizing her.

Perhaps she would be the one to die from a wildly beating heart.

\* \* \* \*

Nick's breaths came out ragged as he tied the satin robe together just underneath her breasts. If he died right now, he'd be happy. Catherine was absolutely breathtaking, and the view from where he stood was perfect. Although he couldn't see much skin, the gown hugged her bosom. The gentle curves and rigid points of her breasts tempted him to

touch. To kiss. To enjoy. Gritting his teeth, he tried to resist, but the effort was too much to bear.

After tying the bow, he slid his hands along the silkiness of her robe, around her waist then headed down her legs. As he came up, he moved them to just below her breasts. He paused for only a brief moment, then cupped both mounds.

A deep moan escaped her throat and her body melted against his. His arms were the only things keeping her from sliding to the floor.

It was so nice to have her breasts in his hands without all the restrictions of the dress and the underclothes she wore during the day. Even though she still had her gown on, the silkiness excited him as he moved his hands around her breasts in circular motions.

Bending his head, he kissed the lobe of her ear, ran his tongue around the outside, then dipped it once inside. She moaned again, which stirred an incredible flame of desire in his body that had never happened before.

"Kitty? Did you know I was coming to your room tonight?"

"N ... no."

This wasn't the answer he expected. "Then why are you wearing this gown?" His hands became wilder, which made her moan louder.

"Your father—"

Her words jerked him from his passionate state of mind and he withdrew as if her body were hot coals. She swayed, but righted herself before falling. She turned and faced him.

"My father?" His voice rose, anger gripped his chest. "You were dressed like this for my father?"

She wrapped her arms around her middle. She shook her head and her bottom lip trembled. "He asked if I would stay the night with him."

"And you agreed? Why?"

"Nicholas, I'm his ... his..."

"You're not betrothed yet, and the announcement hasn't been made." He ran his fingers through his hair. His stomach clenched as if he'd just received a hard punch. "Don't you even care about his health? Did you forget what the physician said?"

Tears formed in her eyes. "No, I haven't forgotten, and I told Grant no, but he said he wanted me in his bed once before he dies." Her voice broke. "What am I supposed to do? I don't want to go to him either because I'm not ready, yet he wants to be with me before he dies. Tell me Nicholas, what kind of choice was I to make?"

He turned away and scrubbed a hand over his chin. "I don't know, Catherine. All I know is I don't want him to die. I'm not ready for that to happen, and with you going to his bed ... that will most likely cause his heart to fail."

She stepped up to him and placed her hand on his shoulder. "I'll try and talk some sense into him. In fact, you do the same. He's not expecting me for a while, so speak with him. Please."

He turned and faced her. He wanted to take her back in his arms and run his hands up and down her body again, and make her sigh in that incredible way. But he couldn't. He shouldn't have done it in the first place.

Staying away from her this past week only made him want her more. Seven days were definitely too long to be away, yet he needed that separation. This relationship between them was a dangerous attraction, and was getting worse by the second.

Then again, he didn't want it to end. Confusion pounded behind his eyes, but he had to come back and see her again for his own peace of mind.

"All right. I'll speak to him." He turned to leave but before he reached the door, she stopped him.

"Nicholas?"

He looked at her.

Her tongue drew a moist path across her lips. "Why did you come in my room tonight?"

He scanned over her body briefly, his already aroused loins heating again. No, he couldn't tell her the reason. She made him remember she was his father's woman, not his.

"Not to worry, my dear Kitty. The reason no longer exists, or will it ever." He walked out the door, closing it tightly behind him.

What had he been thinking? But he wouldn't take back what he just did to her. If anything, he needed to feel the excitement, to hear her passionate moans, to see the desire in her eyes. He needed to know she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

But would that be enough when he watched her wed his father in a few months?

He cursed and hurried down the hall toward his father's room.

Nick wanted Catherine more than he realized. He'd loved her for so long. But he also wanted to see his father happy—to die happy.

God! Why couldn't life be simpler?

\* \* \* \*

After an hour passed with Nick arguing with his father, he stalked out of the room and headed toward Catherine's. That stubborn man! His head was hard as a mule. Why couldn't his father see the mistake in having such a beautiful, intoxicating woman in his bed?

Jealousy ate away at his gut and he clenched his hands. *He* wanted Catherine in *his* bed. Not his father's.

As he stepped to her door, it opened and she came out, her head down. He stood in front of her and stopped her with his hands as he grasped her shoulders.

"Nicholas," she gasped. A smile brightened her face.

He pushed her inside the room and shut the door behind him.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Did you talk to your father?"

"Yes, but he's very obstinate. I couldn't talk him out of it."

Her smile dropped. "What am I going to do?"

He took his time to look over her body, loving the way the gown formed to every curve. Her nipples tightened the longer he devoured her with his gaze. His hands itched to touch her in a purely erotic way.

But this wasn't the time for his loins to do the thinking. He shook the lustful thoughts from his head and grinned.



"Well, to begin with, we're going to change your nightgown."

She lifted her eyebrows. "We are?"

"Yes. To one less alluring." He strode to her large closet and swung open the double doors. "Which one of these gowns would you wear during the dead of winter?"

She stepped past him and touched the white flannel, long sleeve, high-necked gown.

"Splendid." He faced her, and reached for the tie of her robe, brushing past her breasts on the way. She sucked in a breath. He gritted his teeth, holding in the pleasurable groan.

She whapped his hands and stepped back. "I can get undressed by myself."

"I know. I thought it might be rather fun to undress you." *Very enjoyable, in fact.*

"No, I'll undress myself." Taking the flannel gown, she hurried into her bathing chamber. Within a few minutes, she stepped out, wearing the plain gown.

Nick's gaze ran down her curvy figure. Although this one covered more of her and didn't mold to her breasts like the first one, it still looked very sensual on her. Maybe it was the pure white color, or maybe the way she stood with her hair flowing around her shoulders and back, or maybe it was because his body was heated up and he wanted her no matter what she wore.

"How do I look?" she asked with arms spread out.

"You're still very desirable, but at least the gown isn't as bad."

She smiled. "Any last minute suggestions?"

"Whatever you do, don't take off your gown or let my father remove it. Keep his hands on the outside of your gown and don't let them go underneath."

She blushed a bright red. "All right."

He moved in closer to her and cupped her head, his thumbs rubbing across her soft cheeks. "And one more thing ... don't kiss my father the way you kiss me. That, too, is very exciting." Her gaze dropped to his lips, and he fought the urge to kiss her.

"All right, I won't kiss him that way."

As he looked over her beautiful face, his loins ignited again. Her eyes were too soft, her lips too tempting. Damn his willpower. He had to kiss her—if only briefly.

He bent and gently touched his lips to hers, but pulled away before making it into more. "You'd better go."

She nodded, then stepped away and walked out of the room, leaving him to watch after her.

His heart cried out for her to stop, to come running back into his arms. He fought the urge to beg her to stay the night with him, to stay by his side where she belonged. But she remained walking toward his father's room, and he couldn't stop her.

## Ten

"Come in."

She held her breath, afraid her churning stomach would deposit all over the floor. On shaky legs, she walked into Grant's room. Shadows danced on every wall, making the moment more ominous. His valet and sister were gone.

She bit her lower lip. Where's Mrs. Berkley when she needed her the most? If that woman knew about tonight, she'd have pulled Catherine by the ear back to her room and kept her under lock and key until Catherine's marriage day.

But nobody stopped her as she made her way toward his bed. Her heart hammered against her ribs, causing her chest to ache. The quick rhythm made her stomach churn that much more.

Propped up by pillows, Grant sat straighter on his mattress. He squinted her way until she stood beside the bed. In the dimness of the room, she noticed he had a lot of Nick's features—his straight nose, the same square chin with the small dimple placed in the middle.

In a way, his profile even resembled Nick's. Grant could still be considered a very handsome man. This is what Nick would look like when he grew older. Too bad she couldn't close her eyes and think of Nick when she was with Grant.

When his hand touched the thick material covering her body, his eyes widened. "Catherine? What's this? A robe and nightgown? That's very inappropriate, don't you think?"

She caught her breath. "It is?"

"Why, yes. What would Mrs. Berkley say if she knew you were in my room alone without a proper escort? And in your ... night clothes."

She bit her lower lip, afraid to let out the relieved sigh waiting to come forth. *He didn't remember.* That could be the only explanation. He'd been a different man while talking to her earlier, thinking she was her mother, and now he was back to being the man she enjoyed talking with.

Ashamed, she crossed her arms over her chest. "Please forgive me, Grant, but ... I hurried to see you because you made it sound like it was most important."

He patted the mattress next to his hip. "Please sit. I do have something I need to speak with you about."

Hesitantly, she lowered herself to the very edge of the bed.

He smiled. "I think it's time we discussed the betrothal."

"Betrothal?"

"Yes. I haven't made it public yet, only to give you time to adjust to the idea."

She nodded. "I appreciate that."

"But now I want to make it public. Is that all right?"

The lump in her throat cut off her supply of air and she tried to swallow it. How should she answer? No, it wasn't all right? No, she didn't love him as a wife should and could never have passionate feelings for him? No, because all she could think about lately was Nick's stirring kiss and the way his hands had touched her body not too long ago.

Inwardly, she groaned. Did she even have a choice in the matter?

"That's fine, Grant."

He turned to the stand beside his bed, his hand patting the area until it bumped against a black velvet box. He lifted it and brought it to her, opening it to reveal a gold band with cuts of ruby in the center.

She gasped and gingerly touched the ring. "Grant, it's beautiful."

"This is the betrothal ring. Would you wear it?"

Tears stung her eyes. She nodded and held out her fingers. He slipped the ring on her fourth finger then squeezed her hand.

"You don't know how happy you've made me."

Her chest tightened. "When ... when is our wedding date?"

"I thought about having it one month from today. There's no reason to have a large ceremony. Our family members will be enough, don't you agree?"

"Yes." Her voice choked. If she didn't leave soon, she'd cry in front of him, and right now, she didn't want to explain her mixed feelings.

His arms dropped to his side and he sagged against the pillows. "I'll make the announcement to the family tomorrow evening. Is that suitable?"

"Yes."

His eyes closed. "Again, thank you, Catherine. You're a very special woman."

She waited for him to say more, but his slow, deep breaths let her know he'd fallen asleep. A tear leaked from her eye and ran down her cheek. She wiped it and stood. With each

step out of his room, her heart sank. Her life was over, and there wasn't a thing she could do to stop it.

Instead of going directly to her room for fear she'd see Nick, she wandered down the stairs and passed several empty rooms on the bottom floor. In the library, she found a sofa and curled on the soft cushions, burying her face into the throw pillows, sobbing out her frustrations.

\* \* \* \*

Heat touched Catherine's face and a bright light stirred her from a deep sleep. She blinked a couple of times, squinting against the rays of sun streaming through the window. Out of the corner of her eyes, a wall of books drew her attention.

*Where am I?* She jumped up, but her stiff body cried out in pain. She'd spent the night on the couch. Stretching her limbs, she grimaced and slowly eased the inflexibility.

She drudged back to her room and straight to her bathing chamber. As usual, Emily had her clothes laid out. Her maid wasn't around to help her dress, but that was just fine.

This morning, she wanted to wallow in her sadness without having to explain anything to Emily. She wanted to ponder her dreary life and how she could make it happy. As long as Grant didn't touch her, didn't kiss her or show affection, she might be able to bear it.

But it wasn't fair to ask that of him. After all, the sole purpose of marrying was to have children. She wanted children, but didn't want to have to suffer going through the process with Grant. Just the thought of doing *that* with a man she grew up thinking of as an uncle made her ill. If only she

could think of something else during that time. If only she could think of ... Nick. Obviously, Grant thought of her mother, so why couldn't she think of another person? Unfortunately, two wrongs didn't make it right. Would it ever be right?

She stripped off her robe and nightdress and reached for her undergarments. An unfamiliar sound made her pause, and her heartbeat tripled in rhythm. She snapped her head toward the deep breathing coming from the corner of the room, holding her clothes against her nakedness.

Asleep in the chair next to her bed, Nick's head rested against the wall, his mouth open, soft snores escaping his throat. He still had on the clothes he'd wore last night. Slipping on her robe, she walked to him. He must have waited to see how things had gone between her and his father. She smiled.

Even with a night's growth of beard, he was still quite handsome. Slightly messed, his raven hair stood up in clumps, and his clothes were wrinkled. But he still made her heart come alive.

Pushing a lock of hair off his forehead, she whispered, "Nicholas? Nicholas, wake up."

His eyes fluttered open. He blinked, scanned the room, then his gaze flew back to her. He straightened and rubbed his eyes, blinking a couple times more before meeting her stare.

She smiled. "Good morning, Nicholas. Did you sleep well in my chair?"

He stood and stretched his arms high in the air, arching his back. "Heavens, no. That piece of furniture is definitely not made to sleep in."

She laughed. "Why did you spend the night in my room? Do you know what would have happened if Mrs. Berkley had caught you?"

He scrubbed his hand over his unshaven chin. "I hoped you'd come back last night. I thought maybe you'd be able to talk my father out of your sleeping arrangement."

"Everything turned out just fine," she said. "He didn't even remember telling me to come to his room. We talked a few minutes, and I left. I wandered the house and ended up in the library where I fell asleep."

His grin broadened. "Indeed? You didn't sleep with him?"

"I didn't."

His shoulders sagged and he sighed. "So, father is all right?"

"Yes."

"Good." He stepped away and ran his fingers through his messy hair. "I suppose I'd better go back to my room before I do get caught."

"Yes, you should."

His gaze roamed over her body in a leisure exploration. Conscious she was still in her robe, she crossed her arms over her chest. When he met her eyes, he grinned.

"Would you like to go horseback riding with me this morning, before breakfast?"



She nodded, her heart quickening. More than anything she wanted to ride her horse, to feel the wind in her hair. And yes, heaven help her, to be alone with Nick. "I'd love to."

"Splendid. I'll meet you at the stables in one hour."

The second he left her room, she rang for Emily. As she rushed through her toilette, she instructed her maid to make haste and get her presentable. She dressed in her purple riding habit; the skirt and jacket were deep violet trimmed with black lace. She wore a white blouse that ruffled at the neck and around her wrists. The jacket fit snugly and made her breasts look larger and her waist smaller.

Emily fixed Catherine's hair in a tight braid, leaving a few tendrils loose around her ears. Catherine wanted to look her best for Nick today, hoping he wouldn't get upset at her for making the effort.

Nonetheless, she would enjoy herself to the fullest. After all—her freedom would soon be taken from her once the betrothal announcement was made. She had missed Nick these past several days and wanted to make up for all the time he'd been away.

Exactly forty-five minutes later, Catherine hurried down the stairs, peeking over her shoulder on the lookout for Mrs. Berkley. She rushed outside to the stable without seeing her companion. Right away Nick's deep voice made warm tingles shoot through her bosom as he conversed with one of the stable hands.

When she entered, they both turned her way, but it was Nick she couldn't take her eyes off of. His face was clean-shaven and his hair, still a little damp and combed away from

his face. The black riding trousers fit his body like a glove, and on his muscular legs, black knee-length riding boots. The white lawn shirt under his fawn-colored jacket had a couple of buttons undone at the throat, which he really should have fastened, but she was glad he didn't. Strange that he didn't have his vest and cravat. He looked so relaxed, so casual. He could have been mistaken for one of the stable boys himself ... but he was certainly no boy.

Catherine's heart quickened from the thought. When his gaze traveled over her, the beat doubled in rhythm. He met her stare and his blue eyes softened.

He grinned. "You're early."

She shrugged. "I can't help it. I love to ride. I love horses." *I love* ... She quickly stopped her thoughts. She definitely couldn't think *that*.

"Good. I'm glad because I have a long morning planned for the two of us."

He took the reins from the groom and led the horse over to her. "You've ridden Beauty before, haven't you?"

"Yes. She's a perfect horse."

He walked up to her, placing his hands on her waist. Heat speared through her clothes and ignited her skin. She held her breath, holding in a pleasurable moan.

"You don't mind if I help you mount, do you?"

She shook her head.

He picked her up and set her on top of the horse without taking his eyes off hers. "Are you comfortable?"

"Yes." She was helpless to look away as the warmth in his gaze kept her hypnotized.

He winked before turning back to his horse, which the groom had brought over. Nick expertly mounted. He glanced at her and smiled. "So ... you like to race, do you?"

She grinned wider. "You can't remember?"

He chuckled. "Good. I'll trust you can keep up with me?"

She joined in his laughter as she urged her horse forward. "Keep up with you? I think not, my lord. You're going to be keeping up with me." She dug her heels into the horse's belly and pushed the mare forward, taking off in a run.

Nick's laughter rang out as he pushed his stallion forward to catch up. He did eventually, and then for the next little while, they each played catch up. First her, then him as they raced. Nick must have been holding back out of kindness, because he was allowing her to win more times than she should have.

After a while, they stopped by a stream to rest the horses. Nick jumped off his horse first and hurried to help her dismount. He held her close for a few minutes longer than propriety allowed. Hesitantly, she stepped away. She liked the feeling of his hands on her body almost too much.

\* \* \* \*

Nick smiled down at the beauty in his arms—and wished to hell he could remove this infatuation. But if the truth were told, being with her made him happy. It was more than physical attraction; it was the twinkle in her eyes and the heavenly lift of her voice that made his heart pitter-patter like it'd never done before. Childhood memories were now

replaced with recent memories ... those he couldn't dismiss from his mind.

Lately, he'd been a jumbled mass of confusion. He was extremely attracted to her, but he shouldn't be. He loved making her smile and laugh, and especially, loved making her eyes glow a passionate lavender whenever the subject turned personal, and especially when he kissed her.

Today was no different.

He didn't want this morning to end.

Nick had arranged with the cooks to prepare a basket of food for their breakfast. He laid out a blanket, helped her down, then sat beside her. She sectioned out the food on plates and they ate. The mood was still very joyous while they discussed their morning ride. Nick enjoyed making her laugh and seeing her smile, but wished the mood would turn serious, as it had last night.

"Oh, Nicholas." Catherine sighed heavily after she'd finished eating. She stood and walked to the edge of the stream. "Although I know I'll never hear the end of it from Mrs. Berkley, this morning has been so wonderful."

He grinned. "Yes, I'm really taking pleasure in this morning's activity also."

She looked around the area at the gurgling clear stream, to the tall oak trees and over the spacious meadows. "You know, it's hard for me to imagine all this will be mine some day. I still feel like a visitor here."

He chuckled. "Well, of course you do. You haven't been here a fortnight yet."

"Yes, but in a way, it seems like I have been here longer."

Nick stood and walked over to a tree, leaning up against it as he faced her. "Has it been difficult taking care of my father?"

She looked at him, then quickly glanced down at the rushing water cascading over the rocks. "Yes and no. I'm privileged to have the time to get to know him better, but sometimes I wish I could be doing something else."

"Like what?"

She shrugged. "Just something besides playing nursemaid."

"You know, you're doing a wonderful job. My father's health is improving little by little."

She relaxed her smile. "Does that mean you've forgiven me for bringing on your father's attack?"

He nodded. "I forgave you the day we went to London. I realized any man alone in your company would lose himself in passion."

"I want you to know your father never once did anything improper. His face only fell to my chest after he'd lost consciousness."

His chest tightened with an unfamiliar emotion, one that made him want to take her in his arms and hold her ... forever.

She made such an alluring picture standing in the morning shade. He couldn't stop from gazing over her perky breasts. Deep inside him, he wished she'd take off that jacket. Yet he couldn't only be attracted to her alluring body, because her charm had him eating out of her hand, too.

"What worries you about your upcoming wedding, Kitty?"

She sighed again, then knelt by the stream, running her fingers in the water. "From the very first time your father kissed me and the few times after, I've the worst feeling in my stomach. I feel unclean, like something isn't right. Yet I try to tell myself it's right because I'll be his wife. But for some reason, my body just won't accept it. I can't feel good when he kisses me and looks at me that way as if he's mentally undressing me. Fear crawls over my skin, and it makes me sick."

"Is it because you don't know what to expect?"

She glanced at him. A dark pink color highlighted her cheeks. "Perhaps."

He walked to her and crouched beside her. "Kitty? What do you know about the marriage bed?"

Her face darkened even more and she looked away. "For one, I know I shouldn't be discussing this with you." She stood and moved to the tree.

Chuckling, he straightened and walked to her. "But what if I told you it's all right? You can talk to me."

She laughed softly. "Oh? Like a sister talks to a big brother?"

He ran his fingers gently over her heated cheek then moved them down to her chin, turning her face toward him. "No. How about talking to me as a good friend, or perhaps even an instructor."

Her cheeks still held a slight blush. "You want to instruct me?"

His heart hammered against his ribs at the wonderful, exciting thought. He grinned. "Do you wish me to?"

The rise and fall of her chest increased in rhythm, her breaths more ragged. "How would you teach me?"

He leaned his head closer to hers, his thumb gently stroking just underneath her bottom lip. "Any way I can."

His lips hovered above hers, but he didn't kiss her. He couldn't ... it wouldn't be right. But when she sighed and leaned closer, closing her eyes, he couldn't stop himself any longer. Just as her lips touched his, there was a shout in the distance.

They jumped apart. Under his breath, Nick cursed fate's ill timing. He ran his fingers through his hair and walked into the clearing to discover what the commotion was about.

A lone rider atop of a horse galloped Nick's way. He growled. Damn his brother for ruining the moment.

"Nick." Gregg's voice rang out. "Is Catherine with you?"

"Yes," he answered. "What is it? Is something wrong with Father?"

"No, Father is fine. I came to get Catherine." He stopped the horse. "She has a visitor."

Catherine stepped out of the little grove of trees, looking more composed than Nick felt.

"I do? Who is it?"

Gregg's smile wavered as he switched his attention between her and Nick. "It's your father."

She sucked in her breath and the color left her face. She pursed her lips. With a stiff nod, she said, "I'll be there momentarily."

Gregg narrowed his eyes toward Nick and shot him a glare before he turned his horse around and rode away. Gregg

must suspect. But if roles were reversed, Nick would have thought the same. Hopefully, Kitty's reputation wouldn't be ruined now. He dismissed the thought. It wasn't in Gregg's nature to spread gossip.

Nick walked over to Catherine and rubbed his hands up and down her arms. "Are you all right? You look as if you're quite upset by your unexpected visitor."

"Yes."

"I'll send him away if you wish."

She smiled and leaned against him. "That's not necessary. I'll speak with him. Hopefully, I'll discover why he's *really* here."



## Eleven

Catherine entered the drawing room with a straight back and her chin erect. Nick followed, only steps behind her. When her father rose from the sofa and stared her way, pain twisted in her chest. He still held the same accusing glare he had since her mother had died. Why in heaven's name would he suspect her of killing her own mother?

He lifted his chin a little higher over his Vicar's stiff white collar and switched his focus between her and Nick.

"Hello, Father," she greeted without emotion.

The straight line of his mouth relaxed some, giving a hint of pleasantries. "I'm relieved to hear you're finally speaking to me."

Keeping her stance prim and proper, Catherine walked over to a chair and sat on the edge, just as she was schooled to do.

Nick walked over to her father and gave him a hearty handshake. "Good to see you again, Reverend Martin."

"As you, Lord Castledale. How is your father faring?"

"He's doing better than before."

Her father nodded and took his seat on the sofa.

"Catherine, my dear, I've been worried sick about you since you left home, and I needed to assure myself that you were all right. I hope you forgive my unannounced visit."

"Well, you're here now. And as you can see, I'm well." She paused, then asked, "Now why don't you tell me the real reason for your visit?"

A nerve in his cheek jumped—the only sign of his inward annoyance. Perhaps he held back his temper because of Nick's presence. She didn't think she'd misjudged her father. There had to be a reason he came to see her. Perhaps he thought the engagement wasn't going quick enough for his greedy tastes.

"Well, I..." His gaze flew from Catherine to Grant's son.

Nick strode to Catherine and gently touched her shoulder. "I'll leave you two alone to visit in private."

As Catherine smiled into his warm and caring eyes, her heart fluttered. "Thank you." He left and she wished she could go with him ... wished they hadn't been interrupted by the stream in the first place.

Catherine took a deep breath and wiped the smile off her face, replacing it with a scowl. She narrowed her eyes toward her father. "So, what's the real purpose for this visit?"

His expression hardened, his jaw clenched and his lips curled. Chest heaving, he switched his gaze between Catherine to the now empty doorway. "Catherine, where were you when I first arrived over thirty minutes ago?"

"I was out riding. Didn't Gregg explain that to you?"

"You were riding with Lord Castledale? Alone?"

She swallowed the lump of fear that gathered in her throat whenever his voice turned harsh like it was now. "Yes."

"Where in God's name was Mrs. Berkley?"

"I'm certain I don't know, Father. I have yet to see her this morning."

He lifted off the sofa and paced the floor in front of her. "Good Lord, woman, have you no decorum? Do you wish to make a laughingstock out of Grant Fielding's family?"

Tears burned behind her eyes, but she refused to shed them. She would not let her father humiliate her this way. "I have done nothing wrong." Her stomach twisted from the lie.

"Being alone in a man's presence while you're betrothed to another is *very* wrong." He ran his fingers through his hair, his eyes darkening with invisible daggers he threw her way.

"But I'm not betrothed. Although in Nicholas' mind, he thinks I am."

He growled and marched up to her, stopping mere inches in front. "That's not the impression I received a few minutes ago. I noticed the way he looked upon my daughter. And I can guarantee he didn't have pure thoughts."

Her body shook, but she still tried to remain strong. "I think you are wrong, Father."

"I'm rarely ever wrong about these things."

"I ... I beg to differ. I believe you've said and done a few things that have led me astray. As it is, I cannot trust your word any longer."

His eyes darkened even more, turning almost black. She hitched in a breath, but she would not cower. Never again.

"What would Grant think of his betrothed spending so much time with his son?"

"Actually, Father, Grant is the one who insisted."

He stepped back, his eyes wide. "Why would he do something so ludicrous?"

Annoyed, Catherine sighed heavily. "If you must know, Grant is quite ill. His weak heart caused him to have an attack the other day. Grant has been up in his room since that time."

A small amount of color left his face. "Is he all right?"

She nodded. "With the constant care given by me and his sister, Lady Gertrude, he's getting better. He won't be able to get out of his bed for a few more days yet, but he's gradually gaining his strength."

"I'm relieved to hear that." He paused, a look of arrogance quickly replacing his sorrowful expression. "At least he's not aware you're in love with his son, but I'm quite certain the news will certainly cause his death."

Catherine sucked in some air and held her anger. How could she make him believe? She took slower breaths, trying to calm herself before he realized she was over-reacting.

"Father, I really have no idea what you're referring to. Whatever you may have thought you saw between Nicholas and myself, it was certainly not love. I admire and respect him, as I'm sure he does me, but we are just friends. He and his two brothers are the brothers I never had. All three of them keep me occupied and they look out for my welfare."

"You're only fooling yourself, daughter."

"Oh, you'll never listen to me." Letting out an unladylike growl, she lifted from the chair and walked toward the door, but before leaving, she glanced over her shoulder. "How long do you plan on staying?"

"I thought I'd stay a week or so. That should give me and Grant the time to get the betrothal arrangements out of the way."

She nodded. "I'll instruct the maids to prepare a room for you." She turned and left, her hands balled into fists.

If her father suspected her true feelings ... could others also?

\* \* \* \*

The invisible chain around Catherine's neck tightened minute by minute. Entertaining her father and keeping him from guessing more about her feelings for Nick remained top on her list. Gregg and Ian also helped keep him busy. Once in a while, Nick tried, but Catherine was exhausted from the effort it took. She wanted her father to leave posthaste. She didn't want him in the first place. He kept reminding her it was to sign the betrothal agreement, yet nothing further had been mentioned.

Her father watched her closely when Nick was around, so Catherine tried not to act as if she melted every time Nick's blue eyes looked her way. But the truth was, she couldn't breathe normally in his presence. When he accidentally brushed by her, tingles danced over her body and ignited an inner flame. She wanted to be back in his arms with his mouth on hers ... but not until her judgmental father left.

Was she really in love with Nick as her father suggested? Is this what being in love was like? In a way, she hoped not. Although under duress, she was going to marry his father and so their love could never be.

But then, she wasn't in love with Grant and she didn't think she ever would have that emotion for him. She couldn't stop thinking of him as her uncle. Not only that, she was still so very innocent and scared of the unknown.

Perhaps she'd take Nick up on his teaching lessons. Her stomach fluttered. Maybe if she knew more about the art of making love, she wouldn't be so frightened and sick when her soon-to-be husband touched her.

Though her father was here, she didn't take any time away from Grant. She spent many hours with him and Lady Gertrude up in his room, either talking or playing chess. Grant's health slowly improved, although his eyesight didn't seem to have the same fortune.

She hesitated to tell Grant about her father staying here. It worried her that the news might excite him. He might even call her father up to sign the betrothal papers. But before that happened, there were things she needed to know about her soon-to-be-husband. Things she'd wondered about lately—especially since he started calling her Sophia and thinking she was her mother.

Later that day, Catherine sat on Grant's bed playing draughts with him. Most of the time his sister slumped in the chair, asleep with a book lying open in her lap, her mouth open while soft snores breezed from her throat.

Grant set his cards on the table and breathed a heavy sigh. "My dear, Catherine. Why are you off in another world? Would you rather be somewhere else right now?"

Her attention snapped back to Grant. "Oh, no. I want to be here, really I do, it's just that I have a lot on my mind."

He grinned. "Planning a dinner party, are you?"

"Heavens no! I wouldn't do that with you still laid up in bed."

His knuckles breezed across her cheek. "You're such a sweet woman." He paused, then asked, "So, what has been on your mind?"

Her heart hammered against her ribs and her hands moistened. Fear of hearing the wrong thing made her hesitate—but she must know. "Grant? Could I ask you something although it might be somewhat awkward and maybe a little painful to answer?"

"Yes, my dear. Go ahead. I'll tell you anything."

For courage, she took a deep breath and continued. "Lately I've been wondering about you and ... my mother."

One of his eyebrows lifted. "Your mother? What about her?"

"I want to know what sort of feelings you had for her. Were you in love with her a long time ago? Before she married my father?"

Sitting back against his pillows, he folded his arms across his stomach, keeping his gaze on her. "What gave you the impression there was anything between us?"

Looking down at her folded hands resting in her lap, her mind quickly pieced together what she could say. "A few times you've called me by my mother's name. Then, there's the fact that my mother couldn't wait to get me married off to you, and it made me wonder if it was because she couldn't have you." She finally looked up at him. "Did you want to marry me because I resembled my mother?"

Grant's smile faded, his eyes never leaving hers. "You're a bright girl, Catherine."

"Does that mean I'm correct?"

"Would you hate me if I told you yes?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I'm so confused about all of this. Will you please tell me about you and my mother?"

He nodded. "As I've told you before, your father and I were friends. Your grandfather was the second son. So, he didn't inherit any titles for your own father to pass on, which is why they chose to become vicars. I was being trained to take over as duke before my father died and didn't have time for a lot of friends. So, your father's friendship meant the world to me."

He took a sip of tea before going on. "We were inseparable as boys. When I was in my fifteenth year, your father of course was three years younger. He met a lovely young girl who lived in the nearby village. We all became good friends and we secretly did things together. Slowly I began to fall in love with this girl, as did your father. But I didn't know it, nor did he realize my feelings. On my eighteenth birthday I was sent on holiday with my father for a couple of years. My family sailed quite a bit and so I wasn't able to get any letters to my friend and the girl I had fallen in love with."

He stopped for a few seconds and took another sip of his tea. "My father knew about Sophia and that was why he sent me on holiday. You see, because I was next to inherit the dukedom, I was expected to marry a girl with money and titles, and Sophia had neither. When I came home from my travels, I found out about two horrible setbacks. One, that my



family had arranged my marriage to a girl I hardly knew, and two, that the woman I was in love with had married my best friend. I was crushed more over the fact Sophia was lost to me forever, than learning I was to be married within a year. Although I could see Sophia loved your father, I tried everything to convince her to leave him and become my mistress, but she wouldn't. She wanted to be my wife or nothing at all, so because I couldn't have her for myself, I left her alone."

He reached for Catherine's hand, not quite touching it. She took hold of it and he squeezed.

"I was never really in love with my wife," he continued, "but was the proudest father in the world. Not too long after my youngest son was born, my wife died. After that, my father passed on and I became Duke. It was then when I heard from your father. He told me after seven miscarriages, they finally had a baby. I realized how much I missed your parents, so several times a year I took my boys and we visited your family. As I spent more time with you and watched you grow up, I noticed you played with my sons like I used to play with your parents. When you turned fourteen, I noticed the remarkable resemblance between you and your mother and slowly I began to have feelings for you."

"So, you love me because I look like my mother."

"Yes, and no. I did love you because you reminded me of her, but you're so very different than she. There's a charming stubbornness about you I couldn't resist. I decided you would bring joy into my life, and so I offered for your hand in marriage. Your parents didn't like the idea at first, and it took

them awhile to decide, but soon they agreed that it was time for our families to be joined together."

She stood and walked around the bed slowly. "Grant? Do you know when you first kissed me that I felt unclean? Do you know I get sick every time you want to hug me or even kiss my cheek?" She stopped and looked at him.

A scowl creased his forehead. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because maybe our relationship isn't right. You wanted my mother, not me, and I think of that all the time."

"But we'll soon be publicly betrothed. Damn it, you'll have to submit. I'll have you as a wife." His voice turned harsh.

Tears filled her eyes. "Yes, I know, but maybe it would make things better for me if you'd stop thinking of my mother. Would it be fair if I imagined another man while making love to you? How would you feel if I called out another man's name while you were touching my body?"

Grant looked away, his lips pursed.

"Grant?"

He finally met her stare.

"My father is here visiting for a while." The anger lines in his face disappeared, and he straightened. She continued, "And when you're feeling better, I think the two of you should talk about my mother and the feelings you had ... and still have for her. Until then, I'm not coming back into this room. Do you think that is fair?"

He nodded, but didn't speak.

Slowly, she left the room, confusion filling her head just as much as it had done before. Hopefully, she did the right

thing. But was she really trying to make their relationship better or worse?

\* \* \* \*

Once again, Nick rode out to see his mistress, and once again, he came back unable to go follow through. Sexual frustration had built in him so much he thought he'd burst, but his mistress wasn't the answer. Although experienced at what she did, he couldn't look upon her without wishing her breasts were firmer or she had a thinner waist. Or wishing she had auburn hair instead of blonde. His mistress' eyes were not the beautiful violet color he loved gazing into either.

When she talked, her voice was not musical. And when she let out a pleasurable moan, it sounded fake instead of sultry as Catherine's did. His mistress didn't melt in his arms or gasp every time he touched her. All in all, she wasn't Catherine and no matter what woman Nick went to, she wouldn't do.

He tried to stay away from the house, but the longer he was gone, the more he wanted to be near Catherine. He couldn't go a full day without having to see her or to touch her hand, back, or cheek. He wanted to do more, but her father watched him with hawk-eyes, and he didn't want the Reverend knowing how his body burned for Catherine.

Nick remained polite to Reverend Martin. He and his two brothers kept the man of God entertained as much as they could, but once his urges for Catherine threatened to get out of control, he had to excuse himself and leave before his lust became apparent to everyone around. Especially the vicar.

Nick hadn't spent a moment alone with Catherine since they rode around the grounds the other morning. He couldn't wait until he was with her again, but everybody came between them. How could he go on like this?

He and his brothers, Catherine and her father, and Aunt Gertrude gathered around the dinner table. As always, the conversation revolved around horseback riding; his brothers' favorite pastime lately besides drinking and gambling. Probably because Catherine joined them.

Gregg's gaze wandered to Catherine quite a bit, and Nick recognized that look. Damn, if his brother wasn't infatuated, too. Jealousy twisted in his gut and he tightened his hand around the linen napkin.

Ian, on the other hand, had a different expression on his face when he glanced at her. His brother's narrowed eyes spoke of an entirely different emotion. Anger? Suspicion, perhaps? Ian had always been more difficult to figure out.

Finally Ian cleared his throat, aiming his gaze at Catherine. He wiped his mouth with the napkin before speaking. "Speaking of riding..."

All eyes turned his way.

"Remember the other morning when Gregg's saddle had been cut?"

Catherine's eyes widened. Her drink had been to her lips, but she placed it back on the table without taking a sip. "Yes. Did you ever find out who had tampered with it?"

"Not yet, but as we were asking the servants, one of the stable-hands remembered seeing *you* in the stable that

morning." He arched an eyebrow, his lips thinning. "Were you?"

Her tongue swept out and moistened her lips. "Earlier, yes."

"Really?" Gregg set his fork down and leaned forward, keeping his eyes on her. "What were you doing there?"

She shrugged. "I usually go to the stables every morning whether I ride or not."

"Why?" Ian shot back.

Nick growled. "Really, Ian. What does it matter? Why are you grilling poor Catherine?"

Pink tinted her cheeks and she lowered her gaze to her plate. "It's all right, Nick. I'll answer. I go to the stable because it's always been a place where I can release my anger or frustration ... and nobody can hear or see me."

Her father choked on his drink, but quickly recovered. "How so, my dear?"

She raised her eyes and glared at the vicar. "Because I can talk to the horses and they won't talk back," she bit out.

A stooped figure entered the room slowly. "What's this about talking back?"

Nick gasped. "Father? Why in the devil are you out of your room?" He stood and rushed to his father's side, as did Catherine.

Grant chuckled. "Please don't fret. I'm feeling much better. And the doctor told me I could come down for dinner tonight." His gaze swept around the table until they rested on Catherine's father. Grant squinted. "Besides, I heard we have a visitor."

Reverend Martin smiled and stood. "Your Grace. It's so good to see you again." He walked around the table to him and shook his hand.

"It's good to see you again, Henry."

"I thought it was time to come see how my daughter is faring."

Grant grinned. "Do you not think I'm seeing to her welfare?"

"Of course I think you're taking care of her, but I needed to see for myself."

"Well, I'm thrilled you're here anyway. Come, let's sit and enjoy our evening meal." Nick led his father to the end of the table where Henry Martin sat beside him, before moving to take his rightful place at the other end. Catherine moved closer to Nick. He glanced at her and grinned. His brothers were further up the table by the other two men. Aunt Gertrude sat across the table from Catherine, but concentrated on Henry and Grant.

The conversation mainly revolved between the two old friends as they caught up on each other's lives. Gregg and Ian seemed to be interested in the older couple's stories, but Nick wasn't ... and it seemed Catherine wasn't either.

He couldn't keep his eyes off the breathtaking woman next to him—not that he normally could. Tonight she had a special glow. Her deep, blue silk dress made her hypnotizing eyes twinkle. Bell-shaped sleeves hung off her shoulders and the heart-shaped, deeply cut bodice displayed more of her bosom than he'd seen before. Her hair was up in a loose bun with a few tendrils hanging around her ears and neck. But it was her

full mouth that beckoned him to taste those sensuous lips once again.

Good thing Mrs. Berkley had a headache and stayed in her room, or he'd not be able to look upon Catherine as he liked.

He wanted to be closer, although knew he would draw attention to himself if he did. Her gaze met his quite a bit also, even though she tried not to act as if she did her own inspecting of his person.

He waited for the next time she looked his way, then he smiled. Their gazes held. A soft glow lit her eyes, and when she looked over every inch of his face, excitement raced through his heart. He'd always loved the way she made him feel, as if he were the most perfect man in the world.

She moved in her chair and her skirts brushed against his leg. Some kind of physical phenomenon sparked between them, and he caught his breath, warming his insides. He glanced around the table to see if anyone had looked their way, but the others were busy in other conversations.

Adjusting in his chair, he stretched his leg. When it knocked against hers, heated sparks spiraled through him. Her head jerked up as she looked at him. He smiled and her eyes turned darker. Lord, she would drive him insane before too long. Didn't she know what she did to him?

He moved his foot, but then her foot moved also, and he touched her dainty, slippered foot.

Her chest rose and fell with quick breaths, but she didn't withdraw. Instead, she rubbed her leg with his.

Inwardly he groaned. If only they were alone ... and didn't have all these layers of clothes that obviously were a

hindrance whenever he wanted to touch her and caress every inch of her as he ran his lips and tongue over her flesh...

His libido rose another notch and his trousers tightened across his loins. Was it any wonder with such wicked thoughts running through his mind and witnessing the passion on her face?

What was he doing? Right here in front of everyone? And heaven help him—he didn't want to stop.

\* \* \* \*

Catherine had long since given up on her meal and concentrated fully on Nick's leg rubbing next to hers. She clenched the tablecloth with both hands, and at the same time, tried to act as if she were perfectly normal, but she was far from that right now. Her insides jumped with arousal and all she wanted to do was close her eyes and enjoy. Yet, if she did, she'd moan aloud and everyone at the table would know exactly what was happening at this end.

Nick's actions were certainly improper ... and ill-timed. If they were only alone, maybe it wouldn't be so bad.

No! She couldn't think this way. She had to stop him, now, before anybody noticed.

A movement from the other end of the table drew her attention. Nick straightened. She followed suit. Flame grew in her cheeks and she wanted to find a big bowl of cold water to dunk in.

Grant cleared his throat. "I think we can do away with the port and cigars, gentlemen. Tonight I think it will be very pleasurable to visit in the drawing room with the women.



Grant and her father rose from the table, along with Gregg and Ian. She pushed away and stood the same time Lady Gertrude did, but Nick only rose halfway out of his chair. She narrowed her eyes at him, silently questioning, and he shook his head.

"I cannot move," he mouthed and sat.

"Why?" she whispered.

"I'll explain later."

Everyone moved toward the drawing room. She trailed behind, but left Nick in his chair. Gregg waited for her at the doorway, then held out his elbow and escorted her. The story telling from Henry and Grant picked up again but this time Gregg and Ian weren't as involved as before. The two brothers moved to the card table and dealt out a game of draughts.

Catherine relaxed in a heavily cushioned loveseat and pretended to take interest in her father's stories, although the only thing on her mind was what had almost happened at the table. What had she been thinking? Obviously, not the proper things that a girl in her situation should have been thinking.

It didn't take long for Lady Gertrude's head to tilt against the wall and her eyes to close. Poor woman.

After about ten minutes, Nick entered the drawing room. The conversation didn't stop nor did anyone turn to look at him, all except for Catherine. He sat beside her and smiled.

"What was wrong?" she whispered.

He grinned. "A male problem. It's nothing to worry about. I'll explain later."

That was all he said before he turned his attention to his father and hers.

One boring hour later, Catherine wanted to be alone with Nick, yet knew she shouldn't. It was much too dangerous. Each time she was with him and he made advances, it had gone further ... and she had allowed everything. She was afraid, yet excited to think of what he might do next. Even sitting next to him on the sofa was difficult. The heat from his body blended into hers, especially when his hand brushed her arm, or his leg accidentally rested against hers. Right now his arm leaned against hers as his finger slowly rubbed her skin. The gentleness of his actions drove her wild for more.

"Catherine, my sweet?" Nick asked in a low voice.

She looked his way. "Yes?"

"Would you like to join me in a game of chess?"

She smiled. "It would be my pleasure."

He stood and held out his hand for her to take. She did, and was led to the chess table. Her father kept his eyes on them, so she made certain she acted properly.

Nick set up the game pieces, his gaze switching back and forth between the board and her. The rhythm of her heart picked up and she silently cursed her body's weakness. This was all she needed—and to have her father watching didn't help either.

Soon, her father's attentions returned to Grant. Nick's gaze softened, as did his charming grin.

They were quiet for a while, only making comments about the game, but then Nick disturbed her thoughts when he whispered, "Do you know how beautiful you are tonight?"

Her gaze flew up to his and held. "No," she answered softly.

"You're so damn beautiful I can't stop myself from wanting to touch you," he whispered again. "Do you know how badly I want you right now? I'm using all my willpower not to take you in my arms and kiss you endlessly this very moment."

She shook her head, keeping her eyes locked with his. "We cannot..."

"I want to show you."

She swallowed hard. "No, Nick. We cannot."

"We can."

"There's no way."

"I'll make a way."

Grant's voice boomed behind them, startling Catherine.

"Well, I believe I've overdone it tonight. My body is letting me know it's time for bed." He stood, one hand pressing into his back.

Catherine quickly jumped up, going over to his side.

"Would you like me to help you up the stairs, Grant?"

He caressed her cheek softly. "Yes, my dear. That would be lovely."

Grant said his goodnights to everyone, then left the room with Catherine by his side and started up the stairs. Just as they were going up, Nick came up behind them.

"Here, let me help you too, Father," he said as he took a hold of his father's other arm.

She didn't dare look at Nick, but couldn't resist gazing into his intoxicating blue eyes. But his enchanting stare communicated to her—warning her of his intention.

Always, My Love  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

He would find a way for them to be alone. And Lord help her, she wanted it, too.

## Twelve

Nick tucked the blankets around his father's waist and straightened. Weary lines creased around Grant's eyes and lips. His father smiled, and even the corners of his mouth struggled to lift.

"Father, I believe you have worn yourself out. Now the doctor will reprimand me for being a poor nursemaid."

Wearily, Grant chuckled and shook his head. "I had a wonderful evening. It was good to reminisce with Henry. It's been so long."

"Yes, I'm certain it was good for your heart. Too bad your body disagrees."

Grant flipped his hand through the air then dropped it to the bed. "Balderdash. I needed that time with my family." He turned his head on the pillow and met Nick's gaze. "Did I ever tell you about my scandalous younger days?"

"Yes, Father." Nick ground his teeth. He'd didn't want to hear his father's stories again. Not when spending time with Catherine would bring him more pleasure. Kissing and touching her in wild abandonment had been on his mind all evening. Although it would be wrong, he wanted her ... to claim her as his own.

Inwardly, he moaned. Why was his father torturing him this way?

"No, my boy, I don't believe I have told you." Grant inhaled deeply then struggled a smile again. "This was right after your dear mother passed."

Letting out a deep sigh, Nick sat on the edge of the bed. Hopefully, the story wasn't very long. "You were scandalous, Father?"

Grant nodded. "Although I missed your mother terribly after her death, it was as if a great weight had been lifted from my shoulders, and I felt free. I wanted to punish society for making me act and behave the way *they* thought I should. And although he was dead, I still wanted to prove to my father I could be my own man."

Curiosity overcame him and he scrunched his brow. He'd never heard about this part of his father's life. Hard to believe Grant would be rebellious, especially to his own father.

"There wasn't anything I wouldn't do or say just to make people react. Older lords and ladies were reluctant to invite me to their soirées, only because they feared what I'd do next."

Nick grinned. "Indeed? Father, why are you telling me this?"

Grant shrugged. "Seeing Henry made me think back to those days."

"But you knew Catherine's parents before you married Mother."

"Yes."

"So why would Henry's presence remind you of those days?"

Grant blindly reached for Nick's hand. He moved it within reach and his father's clasped it tightly. "Because I hadn't talked to Henry and Sophia since I married your mother."

During my rebellious time, I became reacquainted with them."

"Father? Is this when you thought about marrying Catherine? After all, it would be scandalous to offer for a young girl who was younger than your own sons."

Grant's gaze moved around the room before finding a point and staring. Nick didn't know what he was looking at, and could only assume memories ran rapid through his father's mind.

"No. That came much later. But I did take you boys and we'd visit them quite a bit."

"Yes. I remember."

"Catherine was such a lovely child, so fun and full of life."

Nick grinned. The lovely child had blossomed and became lovelier, and she'd been introduced to passion. *He'd* introduced her to passion. His grin widened into a full smile.

Grant sighed. "She's so much like her mother."

The tenderness in his father's voice made Nick pause. Had something been going on between him and Sophia?

Nick patted Grant's hand. "You're getting tired. I'll leave now."

"Thank you, son. You've been most attentive. Just like my dear Catherine. She'll make a perfect wife, don't you agree?"

"Yes."

Nick's heart tugged. As much as he wanted to forget she was his father's, he couldn't. Yet at the same time, he couldn't ignore the burning desire inside his body that controlled his every thought and action. Although Catherine belonged to his father, the fact still remained; she would

remain a virgin if she married Grant. Should Nick discuss this with him? Should he point out that Grant could not be Catherine's husband in the physical sense?

No. They'd talked about this too many times and his father had always won the argument.

He stood. "Good night, Father. Pleasant dreams." He turned and strolled out of the room, his heart twisting in knots. The only way Catherine could bare a Fielding child after she was married was if one of Grant's sons performed the deed.

Inwardly, he chuckled. If the gossipmongers caught wind of this, scandal would spread like wildfire. Catherine's name might even be dragged through the mud. Unless ... nobody was familiar with Grant's condition. As far as Nick knew, he was the only one who had any inkling about his father's impotency. And improper as it sounded, Nick almost looked forward to performing that certain task that his father might eventually require of him.

\* \* \* \*

The hot water Catherine sunk into should have relaxed her, but lately that wasn't part of her daily activity. Especially lately. The announcement of her engagement would be made any day now, and then she'd legally be Grant's. During that time, she should stay away from Nick, but how could she refuse such pleasure?

She sighed and rubbed her forehead. But if she gave herself to Nick, would Grant know once they were married? As improper as it sounded, she still struggled with her heart



and mind. Her body and heart wanted Nick. Her mind knew she had to be Grant's.

Moaning, she sank lower in the now cooling water and rested her head against the back. There was really no other choice. She'd been raised properly, and she must give herself to Grant. And if that meant becoming his before the wedding just so Nick couldn't have her, then so be it. Nick's seduction was just too hard to resist.

Tears filled her eyes and she glanced at her nightgown hanging on the door. Tonight she'd go to her soon-to-be husband's room to beg him to take her.

She waited until the water turned cold before she crawled out of the tub. After toweling her body dry, she lifted her gown to the lamplight—the gown she was supposed to wear for her wedding night. Twin pink bows held the material together at her shoulders as the bodice cut deep to display a good amount of cleavage.

Her hands shook as she pulled the silky material over her head and let it caress her body as it slid down her nakedness. Squeezing her eyes closed, she imagined Nick's hands and mouth touching her in the same places. Shivers erupted all over her body, telling her she wanted to feel his touch on her once again.

Imagining Nick was the only way to have Grant make love to her without getting ill. After all, Grant pictured her mother whenever he touched her.

Her legs wobbled as she headed toward Grant's room, her heart sinking with each step. But determination kept her

walking. If she backed down now, she'd be giving herself to Nick.

She stopped right outside his door. Her ragged breathing threatened to crush her chest at any moment, but she stubbornly placed her hand on the doorknob, cracked it open and stepped inside.

Darkness enveloped her, as did the warm air from the fire. She opened her mouth to announce herself, but a noise stopped her. Somebody groaned.

Her heart dropped. Was he in pain? But then another groan came ... and it wasn't from him. A woman's voice sighed with a pleasurable ring.

The rhythm of her heartbeat pounded differently as she took careful steps toward the sounds. The low fire's glow illuminated two people in Grant's bed.

She sucked in her breath and covered her mouth with her hand. *What's going on?*

Grant's head shifted over the woman's naked body and traveled downward.

"Oh, Grant," the woman moaned.

Catherine hitched another breath. Shock vibrated through her system, making her stomach churn. Their voices let her know the two in bed were enjoying themselves immensely. Tears filled her eyes and she quietly backed out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Her body remained numb as she hurried to her room. Yet, seeing Grant with another woman didn't tear her apart. Relief flooded through her, bringing her tears.

She walked into her room, shut the door and leaned against it. Why wasn't she upset with Grant? Why didn't it upset her to see him loving and kissing another woman? But she didn't really love him like a wife should love her husband.

Perhaps it's because she was in love with another man.

Sighing deeply, she walked to her vanity table. After sliding out of her robe, she laid it across the chair, then sat and stared at her reflection through the mirror.

Darkness covered most of the room, except where a few candles had been lit. She picked up her brush and stroked it slowly through her hair.

What was she going to do now? What really could she do?

"Hello, beautiful."

The man's voice behind her made her jump. She searched through the mirror, but detected no movement. She whirled around just as Nick came from the shadows and into the light.

"Nick? How long have you been here?" Her breath quickened.

He stopped inches away from her. Tobacco hung in the air, as did his musky scent of leather—and all man. His gaze dropped to her chest and her heart hammered.

"I was here before you came back." His hand caressed her cheek. "Where were you?" His eyes swept down, looking at her gown again. "Did you go to my father?"

"Yes," she choked, turning away from him. She sat on her stool and looked in the mirror.

"Did you give yourself to him?" he asked in a tight voice.

"No, I—I could not."

Nick's hands rested on her shoulders and he gently massaged them. "Why? Because of me?" His fingers trailed to her neck and moved down the front of her in slow measurements.

Closing her eyes, she let her head fall back against his hard stomach. She couldn't tell him what she'd seen in his father's room, and even if she wanted to, his hands were clearing her mind of everything else but him. Tingles danced over her skin, and she only wanted to think of the way he could intensify the heat inside her body.

"Yes, because of you," she whispered.

His gentle touch moved over her breasts then came up to her shoulders. Each hand took the pink ties that held her gown together and released them. Within seconds the gown slid down her chest to her waist and bared her bosom.

He inhaled deeply. "Damn, woman. You're so beautiful."

Goosebumps accompanied his hands as they traveled back to her neck to her breasts, covering them again, but this time there was nothing between his palm and her skin. Her heart slammed into her ribs. Moaning, she arched.

"Stand, my darling."

Without knowing what she was doing, or even caring why, she obeyed. His deep voice and warm hands intoxicated her fully and made her bend to his every whim.

She stood and faced him as her gown continued its descent to the floor. He groaned and circled his arms around her body, bringing her nakedness against him. The cloth from his shirt rubbed against her skin, the warmth from his body blending into hers.

"Kitty," he whispered as he kissed her lips, her cheek, and her ear. "I want you so badly. I've wanted you since we were young. Let me show you." His mouth traveled to her waiting lips and kissed them urgently.

She dug her fingers into his shirt and held him close, but he broke the kiss and mumbled against her cheek, "Will you let me show you, my sweet?"

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, knowing if she didn't she'd fall to the ground. "Yes. Oh yes, my darling Nick."

He picked her up and carried her to the bed, devouring her mouth with his lips and tongue. She answered him in an urgent appeal, encouraging him to do more by the way her tongue met his.

He laid her down and pulled away again, but only long enough to remove his shirt. He then laid his body beside her. When he took her lips again, it was much slower and gentler as his hand caressed up and down her legs.

"What were you thinking tonight at the dinner table when I rubbed my leg against yours?" he mumbled against her throat.

She tilted her head back. Heady shivers ran over her skin and stoked the inferno raging inside her body. "Your touch excited me, but I feared we'd get caught. Yet I didn't want it to end."

"Do you know why I couldn't get up from the table?"

She opened her eyes and looked at him. "No, why?"

"Because touching you that way and knowing we would be discovered at any moment made me fully aroused, just like I am now."

He took her hand and placed it over the bulge in his trousers. She gasped, but instead of taking her hand away, she moved her fingers over his hardness in exploration. Lord he was hard ... and very large. Never in her life would she have thought this happened to a man. "Is this what happens to men when they touch a woman?"

"No. This is what happens whenever a man desires a woman so much he cannot stand it. This is what happens to me when I'm with you."

She continued to caress him, and wearing a smile he closed his eyes and moaned. Moisture beaded on his forehead and he clenched his jaw. Could she be hurting him? Yet, by his pleasurable sighs and deep moans, she suspected he didn't want her to stop.

"Oh, Kitty." His eyes fluttered open and he met her stare. "Most women are innocent and very shy about the male anatomy, but not you."

She stopped the motion of her hand. Her breath hitched in her throat. "Is that bad? Do you wish me to stop?"

He chuckled. "No. Never stop, my sweet." He grinned. "Are you ready to examine it more closely?"

She shouldn't think this—but she had to say something. "Is this part of my learning? Are you teaching me about the art of making love?"

His chest shook with silent laughter. "Yes, most definitely."

He slid from the bed and unlatched his trousers, pulling them down his lean thighs. The moment his skin showed, she quickly withdrew her gaze, looking toward the opposite side of the room. Heat consumed her cheeks, and she didn't dare peek to see what he looked like. But when he climbed back on the bed and took her in his arms, she turned and met his gaze.

Stripped from all his clothes, his body looked magnificent. Lowering her gaze, she caught the cords of muscles around his neck, his shoulders ... and ah, that beautiful chest sprinkled lightly with dark hair. Hesitantly, she touched him there, and his muscle jumped. She trailed her fingers to his nipple and it hardened. His reaction wasn't that different than when he did this to her.

Letting her hands touch every part of his chest, she lowered them, stroking his tight stomach and hips, down to his ... *Oh my!*

Her throat turned dry and she couldn't breathe. Yet her heart hammered so fast she thought it'd jump right out of her chest.

He took her hand and placed it on his rigid flesh, showing her how to circle her fingers around him. He moved her hand up and down in a pumping action. Closing his eyes, his breathing deepened, but he didn't stop her. Instead, he moved his hips to the rhythm of her hands, his moans increasing by the second ... as did his growth.

Beautiful, and very large. His manhood fit him perfectly.

With one loud groan, he rolled over and pushed her back on the bed, laying halfway on top of her. "It's time for me to show you what a man likes to do to a woman."

She circled her arms around his neck and lifted her mouth to his descending lips, pecking briefly. "Then show me."

When his mouth covered hers, explosions erupted in her head, her body quivering for more. His tongue swept through her mouth touching and caressing with hers, then she answered him back just as boldly. An urgency and fulfillment overwhelmed her until a constant ache grew between her legs. His body needed to be there, and her instincts told her that was right.

His expert hands wandered all over her, not really resting in one place, but touching everywhere. Then they moved to her breasts where they stayed. He shaped and reshaped them into his large hands until she moaned and arched her back for more.

Taking his mouth from hers, he moved it down her neck and over to her breasts. He first kissed around its fullness then gently took the nipple into his mouth and sucked. A deeper moan exited her throat. He turned his attentions to her other breast and repeated what he'd done, then went back and forth between them, giving each the same amount of attention and pleasure.

This had to be heaven. Nothing else could feel so good. While Nick's mouth ravished her completely, she mumbled his name over and over.



Could this be what lovemaking was all about—what her mother had tried to explain to her not too long ago? But what of the pain and bloodshed once spoken of?

Nick moved his hand over her stomach and between her legs. Her first reaction was to stiffen, but he continued to stroke her thighs softly, and within seconds she obeyed his gentle urging and spread them. His fingers touched her intimately and a deep moan released from her throat. One at a time, his fingers slowly slid inside her.

"Oh, Kitty," he whispered huskily. "Do you know how incredible you are? Do you know how perfect you are for me?"

She couldn't answer him, not with her out of control breathing. The tenderness of the rhythm sent her mind into oblivion, making her want more of the tingling running rapidly through her body ... especially to that secret spot between her legs. In silent communication, she moved her hips against his hand. This made his fingers go faster. Pleasure filling her and growing in leaps, she cried out.

"Oh, Kitty. My sweet, Kitty." He kissed her mouth once again.

Moving his body, he positioned himself on top of her, spreading her legs wider while removing his fingers. "Kitty, my darling. I'm going to hurt you, but it will only be for a brief moment."

She opened her eyes. "Hurt me?"

"Yes. I wish I could do it without causing you pain, but it's not possible. Because this is your first time, it will hurt a little."

She nodded. When his large, hot, staff slid into her, a tear and a sharp pain followed. She stiffened and held her breath. Although still on top, he'd stopped moving.

Waiting for the pain to pass, she breathed deeper. Within seconds it disappeared and warmth spread through her, igniting her passion once again. She couldn't wait to experience the thrill of his stroke she'd felt only moments before.

She pushed her hips up against his and that was all it took for him to move inside of her. The roaring explosions of fervor returned, stronger this time.

She held onto him as they moved their hips together in a wild rhythm. The magical, wonderful tingles building inside of her lifted her higher and higher into that great place in her dreams where reality finally happened.

"Nick ... Nick!" she cried out.

He captured her cry with his mouth. He kissed her with so much emotion and with so much tenderness that his heart burst inside his chest. This was the best he'd ever felt when he was with a woman, and he wanted it to go on forever. But when her moans rose to her climax point, he couldn't hold himself any longer, so he let go. He bucked his hips as he released all of his desire and passion inside Catherine.

He lay on top of her while his body relaxed. Her breaths tapered, as did his. Hopefully, he'd shown her every exciting emotion that'd been inside him.

Taking her in his arms, he rolled to his side, still joined inside. He kissed her lips again, this time slower and more

meaningful. Making love to her was exactly what he had dreamed it would be—perfect.

She groaned and wrapped her arms around him, answering his kisses with her own.

After a few minutes he pulled away. "Well, my darling, Kitty. What do you think of making love now? Are you still afraid?"

She smiled. "I'll never be afraid with you."

He hugged her tight and kissed her neck.

"Is that it?" she asked. "Or is there more?"

He laughed. "Only if you want more." He pulled away. "Do you want more?"

"Oh ... it would be so nice. I feel so wonderful when I'm in your arms."

"I feel heavenly, too." He kissed her forehead then rolled over on his back, staring up at the ceiling. The moment he dreaded would come, sweeping over him, making him regret his actions. He really didn't regret making love to Catherine, just going behind his father's back and being deceitful. Guilt gnawed at his gut and tore him apart.

She leaned over and looked down into his face. "Nick? What's wrong? Didn't I please you? I'm sorry."

Cupping her head, he pulled her down to kiss her lips. "No, my sweet Kitty. You pleased me more than I could ever imagine but..."

"But what?"

"But I'm now feeling guilty for taking your virginity. That was supposed to be saved for my father, although I've no idea how he would have taken it."

She tilted her head, her gaze narrowing. "What do you mean? Why wouldn't he be able to take it?"

He sighed then scooted against the headboard, bringing her up with him, still in his arms. "A few years ago my father was in a horse race and was knocked from his steed. A few horses trampled him before we were able to get him out of the way. I didn't know about his problem until later, but that accident left him lame, in the sexual sense."

"You mean your father won't be able to ... to..."

He nodded. "My father will not be able to get his manly organ to work. When I found out he was going to marry you, I worried about it then. I wondered why he wanted to marry such a young girl if he couldn't perform in the husbandly way."

She straightened and faced him, lines creasing in her forehead. "But he would have to have those kind of abilities, especially when tonight I saw him—" She bit her lower lip.

"What? You saw ... his manhood?"

"Oh, Nick. I really shouldn't be telling you this."

"Tell me what you saw," he instructed.

She took a deep breath then continued. "I went to your father's room tonight so he could make love to me and make me his wife. I figured since he would soon be my husband, he should have me before I gave into his son. But when I walked in, I saw him and another woman in bed together."

Nick gasped. "Indeed? Were they making love?"

"I don't know. I really couldn't see that well, but I saw them moving on the bed and I heard them moaning."

"Well, I'll be damned. Maybe he can perform. Perhaps time healed his wounds after all."

Pain etched her eyes, so he wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. "Did it bother you that much to see your soon-to-be-husband with another woman?"

"No. Believe it or not, I wasn't upset. Seeing him with another woman shocked me, but I'm not mad."

"Why? Who was the woman in my father's bed? One of the upstairs maids?"

"I'm not certain."

He shook his head and pulled her back into his arms. "I suppose his ability to make love is back."

"Yes, it does appear that way." She sighed and relaxed against him. "Oh, Nick. What am I going to do? I don't love him and I don't want him to touch me like a husband should. What if he still wants to marry me?"

Softly, he stroked her hair. "Once you're legally wed to him, you'll have to submit."

Raising up slightly, she looked at him. "Surely you jest? Why are you saying this? Don't *you* want me?"

He smiled. "Yes, I've wanted you for as long as I can remember, but you're nearly betrothed to my father."

"So, what are we to do?"

He sighed and raked his fingers through his hair. "Right now there's not a lot we can do. My father has to be the one to call off the wedding."

Pain laced her eyes; liquid gathering in the corners. "What if he doesn't? I want to be with you, Nick."

"We could become lovers. It happens with most of the ton marriages." After he said it, his chest ached—like a knife had been shoved through to his heart. He didn't want to be her lover. He wanted to be her husband.

"What?" She pulled away. "You mean I would have to be your mistress? I won't be able to show my affection toward you and let everyone know how I feel?"

He shook his head. "I don't see any other way. Not until my father changes his mind."

"That's horrid! I don't want to be any man's mistress. I want to be a real wife and have a real husband."

His gut twisted, pain shooting to his heart. "Which is exactly what I want, but under the circumstances—"

With a huff, she turned and climbed out of bed. She slipped her robe on. "Well, that's not good enough. I'll not be any man's mistress."

Pain clutched his chest. He sighed and slid out of bed. After pulling on his pants and shirt, he walked to her. "All we can do is keep trying to persuade my father that you two don't suit." He caressed her cheek. "Until that happens, if we want to be together, we must become lovers."

She slapped his hand away and stepped back. "Nicholas, please leave."

Nodding, he pulled away and headed for the door. With each step, his heart broke until breathing became difficult. When he walked through the door and closed it behind him, the pitter-patter of feet slapped on the floor in her room, her wrenching sobs filtering through the air.

Always, My Love  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

He gnashed his teeth and swore. What the hell had he done now? He must make it right. No matter what it took.

## **Thirteen**

Catherine took careful steps into the dining room, fearful her head would split open if she walked too hard. After last night's disaster with Nick, she had a servant bring her up a bottle of port ... and she finished off every last drop before falling asleep.

Although it had erased the pain, she now regretted that hasty decision. And of course once she'd awakened this morning, her skull and her stomach protested to the particular wrong resolution. It also didn't help that she had another dream about her mother's death; the same dream that plagued her thoughts and left her in a turbulent sea of confusion.

Through squinted eyes, she peered into the room. Her father sat by himself at the table, a Danish halfway up to his mouth as he stared wide-eyed at Catherine.

Inwardly, she groaned. Knowing her father, he'd see right into her heart and know what had happened with her and Nick. It would be her own fault if lightening struck her from heaven right this minute.

"Good morning, Catherine. How are you?"

Catherine didn't smile, nor did she scowl. It would take too much effort and probably be too painful. Besides, her father didn't deserve it.

She moved with slowness to the table and took a seat across from him. Resting her face in her hands, she said, "As you can probably tell, I drank too much last night and I'm



regretting it this morning." She peeked between her fingers. "How about you?"

Henry's smile made Catherine's stomach churn. Did she detect malice lurking in his eyes?

He set the uneaten Danish on his plate. "I had a most pleasant evening, and today is beginning to look brighter, thank you."

"When are you going to return home? Don't you have a flock of sinful souls you need to save?"

"Well, yes, but right now, my daughter comes first."

Catherine dropped her fisted hands to the table and scowled. "Why did you not think of your daughter first before now? Why didn't you think of your daughter two years ago when she needed you the most?"

His eyebrow arched. "What are you prattling on about now?"

Her heart clenched. He hadn't even remembered. "I'm referring to those awful weeks after Mother's death. I needed someone to turn to who would comfort me, but you refused."

His cup of coffee was halfway to his mouth, but he stopped. His eyes darkened, and she was certain fire would shoot out any moment. A muscle in his cheek twitched and his jaw hardened.

He straightened and slowly sat his cup on the table, his gaze never wavering from hers.

"This is sudden. Why bring up this after all these years?"

"It's been *two* years, Father. Don't make it sound longer than that."

He nodded. "Fine. So why discuss this now?"

"Because I want to know the *real* reason you're here, Father. Why do you have concern for your daughter now when you haven't had that emotion for quite some time?"

Linking his fingers, he leaned forward on the table. "I'd rather not talk about your mother's death." His tone of voice was lower, deeper. His gaze narrowed, his jaw tightened. "And you know the reason."

Tears stung her eyes and a knot formed in her throat. "Yes, but I don't understand. You've never told me why you think I killed her."

Nostrils flaring, his chest heaved with deep breaths. "Your mind has hidden the truth from you."

She shook her head. "Why would I want to kill my own mother? There's no logical explanation," she whispered.

"I beg to differ. You forget, insanity runs on your mother's side of the family. Because of your outrage when you discovered your betrothal, I think you went mad."

A tear slid down her cheek. "Then why can't I remember?"

"Because your mind has blocked it out, child."

She took in a deep breath. "Then why didn't you turn me over to the constable?"

He raked his fingers through his hair and rubbed his skull. "Because you are my daughter and I will protect you." His gaze softened. "And no matter what you think, I do love you and care about your well-being."

Fresh tears joined the stream running down her face. "If you cared so much, why did you betroth me to an older man I've loved as an uncle?"

"Oh, not this again." He scowled and shook her head. "He is *not* your uncle. We have been over this countless times. Your mother and I wanted what was best for you. Why can you not see what a fortunate girl you really are?"

Obviously, he would never understand. Catherine quickly stood and wiped her wet cheeks. "You're right, Father. We have talked about this subject too much now."

She turned and walked toward the door, then stopped. She called over her shoulder, "I would like you out of this house this afternoon. Your presence is putting too much stress on Grant, and I fear he'll go into another attack. Maybe when he's better you can come back for another visit, but I don't want to see you again before that time." She angrily marched out of the room, almost knocking down a few servants on her way.

Catherine ran right up the stairs, straight to her room and didn't stop to relax until her bedroom door closed with a resounding thud. Anger shook all through her body.

Too many confusing emotions stormed rapidly through her mind: those from the past, and especially those from the present. How could she deal with everything? Last night's disaster with Nick had only added to her list of problems. But staying locked in her room wouldn't solve anything. If she remained hidden from everyone, her temper would only grow and soon she'd march to Grant's room and accuse him of unspeakable things ... things she was guilty of herself.

Letting out an exasperated sigh, she leaned her head against the door. Why had it been so easy to fall in bed with Nick? All along she'd known he was a womanizer—an expert

in seducing women. But it didn't matter. She'd fallen in love with him. It broke her heart when she realized last night he wouldn't return her love.

Although she was angry with him, she still loved him, but knew she could never be with him again. Why did she think he could do something about their little affair? He was as helpless as she. After all, she was going to be a married woman, so she shouldn't have gotten upset at him for suggesting they be lovers.

She wandered to her vanity and looked in the mirror. The long sleeved, yellow satin day dress made her face pale, even though she was certain her churning stomach had a lot to do with it. Running her hand over her warm cheeks, she swiped the last trace of tears. Then, she smoothed her long hair, not having the ambition to wear it in a fashionable bun today.

A frown marred her face, and she pinched her cheeks to give her ghostly appearance a little color. She must find the courage to talk to Grant about last night. There must be a way to prove they shouldn't marry. She could be more demanding, even suggest things to do that he didn't like.

Yet the thought of returning home made her more ill. Perhaps he'd take pity on her and let her stay here as his ward instead.

She shrugged. It was worth a try.

Taking a cleansing breath, she walked out of her room and to Grant's. After she knocked, his valet opened the door.

"Good morning, Tubbs. Is His Grace awake this morning?"

"Yes, Miss." He motioned his hand for her to enter, and once she did, she stopped dead in her tracks.

Nick.

Standing at the end of the bed, leaning his shoulder against the post, his gaze met hers, his warm smile widening as he assessed her from head to toe. Keeping cool indifference as her mask, she tried to appear as if his affecting scrutiny didn't make her legs weak. But she'd always enjoyed the way he looked at her.

It didn't matter now. She knew how he really felt about her.

But something different hung in the air. Both men looked a trite forlorn.

She definitely couldn't discuss what she had planned now ... not with Nick here and not in this atmosphere. Lifting her chin, she walked past him and to the bed where Grant sat with a breakfast tray on his lap.

"Hello, Your Grace. How are you feeling this morning?"

A frown marred Grant's face. "I'm feeling well—considering the tragedy last night."

She sucked in a breath. *Good Lord! He knows.* Should she quickly explain? But then, Nick didn't look as if guilt weighed heavily on his shoulders. Perhaps it wasn't what she'd thought.

"Last night? What happened last night?"

"You didn't hear?" Nick asked.

"Hear what?"

"Mary, one of the laundry maids, was killed. Beaten to death, in fact."

She gasped and covered her mouth. "Oh, dear Lord. How awful."

"Yes, it is." Grant grasped her hand. "Nobody seems to know anything. The constable is looking into the matter, though, and I have every confidence the culprit will be found."

"I'm relieved to hear that. I know I'll sleep better once this crazed person is found."

Grant took hold of her hands, pulling her to sit next to him. He kissed her hands gently. "What can I do for my beautiful Catherine today?"

"I was going to ask if we could go to the opera, but because of the bad news about Mary..."

Grant waved his hand through the air. "The opera is a stupendous idea. It will give the constable time to question our servants and search for evidence, plus it will help us get our minds off Mary. Besides, it's about time we appear in public, don't you agree?"

Hesitating, she held her breath. No, she didn't really want to appear in public with him, but it had to be done. "Yes."

Grant's gaze switched to Nick. "Son? Perhaps you and your brothers would like to join us? We can make this into a family affair."

Inwardly, she cringed. Although she didn't mind Gregg and Ian being there, Nick could *not* come with them. His nearness still made her breathless. And would she ever forget the way he'd worshipped her body last night?

Nick's gaze remained on her. "I can't speak for my brothers, but I'd love to go. I haven't been to the opera in quite a while." His voice stayed solemn, and she couldn't read his expression. Was he upset or not?

"Splendid," Grant said. "Will you inform your brothers of our plans?" He picked up the mostly empty tray and handed it to his valet. "I'm going to get plenty of rest today. I don't want anything to ruin this evening."

"Neither do I," Nick replied.

Even with the terrible news of one of the servants, she couldn't stop her heart from skipping with anticipation. But it didn't matter. Her only purpose tonight was to help Grant see they should not wed.

\* \* \* \*

Nick stood down the hall from Catherine's room, his gaze focused on her door. The maid had been in there for over an hour, and he'd exhausted his patience wearing out the carpet while waiting. He had to see her again—alone. Had to hold her, kiss her, relive the heat rushing through his body from her passion.

He had to tell her he loved her.

And he had to convince himself Catherine had nothing to do with Mary's death.

He shook that thought out of his head. Of course she didn't. She hadn't actually seen the woman in Grant's bed last night—only heard them.

Should he tell her he loved her? What good would it do anyway? His father still acted as if he would announce the engagement any day now.

He shook his head. That man confused the hell out of him. Perhaps it was his illness making him seem like a different person. Sometimes the old duke acted like he couldn't wait to

marry Catherine, and other times he would rather pawn the young woman onto Nick or his brothers. Usually, it was so his father could sneak around and dally with the laundry maids ... or Mary, in particular. And yet to think his father didn't show one ounce of regret when Catherine had walked into his bedroom this morning.

He strode to the hall window and peered outside. Night had blanketed the earth, only the full moon gave light to the creatures of the dark. Scrubbing his hand over his face, he sighed. If he could have changed the way things had ended with Catherine last night, he would. He'd been an ass to make her believe he only wanted her for his mistress, because a deeper emotion ran through him, confusing yet exciting him.

And causing his chest to ache, because she was still considered his father's.

The whistling of the maid drew his attention toward Catherine's room. Emily walked out and closed the door, then strolled the opposite way.

Smoothing his hand down his royal blue waistcoat and straightening his neck-cloth, he hurried toward her room, his heart beating quicker than his hurried steps. He'd dressed in his best black coattails and trousers, hoping to make an impression on Catherine. When her gaze settled on him and her violet eyes darkened, heated tingles spread over him. He enjoyed that feeling and wanted it always.

When he reached the door, he took a deep breath before turning the knob. Quiet as he could be, he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.



She hadn't heard him as she leaned over the vanity table to pick up her earbobs. He caught his breath. Hair fashioned in a twist on the back of her head, there were only a few tendrils of hair left around her neck and ears. Dressed in a black satin evening gown with short bell-shaped sleeves that hung off her shoulders, she looked as regal and refined as any duchess. She straightened, and when he noticed the deep cut in her diamond-sprinkled bodice, he let out a soft groan.

She swung toward him and gasped, her hand flying to cover the exposed skin at her bosom.

"Nick, you should really think about knocking before you enter my room." Her voice shook.

He moved his attention slowly over her body before meeting her eyes. "I'll think about it." He grinned.

"No, what I meant to say was that you shouldn't just walk into my room. It's not proper."

He moved away from the door and stood in front of her. "Since when have we been proper?" His fingers caressed her cheek softly.

Her chest rose and fell quickly, and he dropped his gaze to her tempting bosom. But she remained standing stiff as a board.

"Since I've realized the mistake in not doing so before," she said, pushing his hand away as she tried to walk past him, but he grabbed her arm, stopping her.

"You look intoxicating tonight. Do you know how hard it's going to be to keep my eyes off you? And it'll be pure torture for me to keep from touching you."

"Then maybe you had better stay home."

She glanced at his attire, her face relaxing slightly. His loins tightened from the heat sparking her eyes.

He stepped closer and pulled on her arm until she fell against him. He circled her in his embrace. "There's no way I'm going to stay away from you tonight. Not when you look as beautiful as you do."

She squirmed, but he held her tight.

"Nick, please let me go," she begged.

His heart twisted. He'd never force his attentions on women, but to let this one go was utterly impossible. "Before I leave, I want to give you something." He released her and reached in his jacket, pulling out a long black velvet box. "This is from—well, you know."

He held the box while she opened it. There, lying surrounded by black velvet was a sparkling diamond necklace. The chain glittered, but not as much as the cluster of diamonds at the base.

Catherine's eyes widened and she touched it in reverence. "Oh, Nick. Isn't it lovely?"

"And it will be even prettier when wore by a beautiful woman."

She smiled at him then looked at the necklace. "Why didn't Grant give this to me himself?"

"I cannot fathom, unless he was upset over Mary's death." He took the necklace then stepped around back of her. "May I?"

While she held still, he placed it around her neck, fighting the impulse to bury his face in her rose scent and nibble her delicate skin. Her breath hitched and she shivered.

Temptation won out and he brushed his lips across her neck, trailing his kisses to her bare shoulder. Her breathing grew deeper and she tilted her head back. Lord, if he didn't pull away now, he'd drag her to the bed.

"Shall we go, my sweet?" he asked huskily.

Grudgingly, he pulled away and moved to the door. "I'll go down first, but please, hurry. I can't bear to be away from you for very long." He gave her a wink and walked out of the room.

His heart still thumping madly in his chest, he met his brothers, father, and aunt in the parlor, each holding a glass of brandy. A drink sounded good right now, but he refused, knowing the only thing that would stop the burning in his loins would be to make love to Catherine again.

Mumbling filled the room—all talk leading to Mary. It seemed everyone wanted to figure out what happened to her.

Grant looked his way. "Do you know if Catherine is coming, Nick?"

"I think she is. Her maid left her room as I was leaving mine."

"Oh, this evening will be a delight with Catherine coming along. She'll bring joy to our dreary evening." His aunt fluttered a fan in front of her face.

"Yes, she will sister, dear." Grant nodded.

Across the room, Gregg threw Nick a glare as he tipped his drink to his mouth. His brother couldn't possibly know what happened last night when he went to Catherine's room. Perhaps Gregg noticed the sappy look that had probably been

plastered on his face as of late. The same look Gregg had been wearing recently.

Thankfully, the good Reverend wasn't coming with them tonight. The older man claimed a headache and said he couldn't make it. At least that was one less person Nick had to worry about upsetting tonight, since Gregg's jealousy was obvious.

The clicking of women's slippers on the marbled floor drew his attention to the doorway. Catherine walked in, and his heart jumped to his throat. How he wished he didn't feel like this about her.

"Good evening, gentlemen. Lady Gertrude." Her voice lifted in a magical tune.

Grant stepped to her and took her hands, lifting them away from her body. "Catherine, my dear, you're breathtaking. You'll be the loveliest woman at the opera." He dropped her hand and touched her necklace. "What a remarkable piece of jewelry. Is it one you purchased while in London the other day?"

Inwardly, Nick cringed. Damn! Why did his father have to go and say that?

Her brow creased and her gaze darted to him, but within seconds it flew back to Grant, the color of her face growing red.

"Uh—no, I didn't. I've had this for a while now. It ... it was my mother's."

Grant smiled. "Well, I think it's beautiful on you."

"Thank you."

Grant held out his elbow. "Are you ready to go? I can hardly wait to show you off. Tonight is going to be absolutely wonderful."

A bitter taste formed on Nick's tongue when his father escorted Catherine out to their carriage, his aunt trailing behind them. His gut twisted and his chest ached. He wanted to run after them, to claim the woman who'd stolen his heart.

But what of his father? The shock to his father just might cause another attack on his heart. Nick couldn't live with himself after that. Guilt would eat away at his conscience for the rest of his days.

Despairingly, he trudged to the coach with his brothers. Ian chatted as if he didn't notice the animosity that hung thick in the air while Gregg aimed his glare at Nick.

Adjusting in his seat, Nick stared out the window, hoping the night would pass quickly; hoping he'd be able to control his feelings of jealousy whenever another man looked at her ... or when his father touched her.

At the theater the family was bombarded with people. Most came over to look upon the new woman in Grant's life, yet they were pleasant about it. Even Lady Ruthaford was polite when she mentioned how well Grant looked.

Catherine and Aunt Gertrude were invited to a couple of brunches for the following week, which Catherine accepted quickly, and they were all invited to the Ruthaford's ball for that night. Nick stood back as the future Duchess conversed with his family's friends and associates. The years she'd attended the girls' school were not wasted. She made the Fielding family proud.

Best that she fill her days with activities and her nights with balls. Then maybe she wouldn't be around to tempt him. Yet being away from her would certainly kill him.

The family made their way to the box before the opera began. Catherine's gaze met his briefly before Grant seated her on the first row then took the seat next to her. Nick's heart picked up rhythm. The next chair on the other side of her was empty. He glanced at his aunt who scooted her way on the back row to the end. Quickly, he sat beside Catherine before Gregg decided it was his chair. Her body stiffened, but she didn't look his way. His brothers sat behind them with their aunt.

When the opera began, Catherine straightened and focused on the stage. Theater workers moved from box to box dimming the lighting. He turned slightly and bumped his arm against her and meaningfully leaned his leg very close to hers. She still refused to look at him.

After a while, the bodily contact didn't seem to bother her. Her shoulders relaxed as she kept her stare focused to the stage.

Nick had no clue what the opera was about, nor did he care. He'd rather watch her out of the corner of his eyes. Definitely more interesting. The most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, she outshone all the others here.

His heart swelled. How had she captured his heart when he'd vowed he'd never give it away?

Within time, his brothers fell asleep, their light snores almost matching his father's and Aunt Gertrude's. Usually Nick would be nodding off about this time, but not with such

an alluring woman beside him. She made him anxious to touch her—eager to have her heated eyes on him while he ran his hands over her skin. He wanted to excite and tease her tonight to the point where she would die if she couldn't make love to him, just as she'd been last night.

His arousal leapt, and he cursed under his breath.

Shifting, he turned more toward her as his arm slipped behind to rest on the back of the chair. So engrossed with the opera, she didn't seem to notice the contact.

He glanced at his two brothers, whose eyes were closed and heads tilted back. Thankfully, he didn't have to worry about them seeing what he wanted to do to Catherine.

He moved his gaze past her to his father. Grant looked just like Ian and Gregg. Perfect. As long as Catherine didn't make any noise or sudden movements, she wouldn't be drawing attention to herself or to him.

Very softly he brushed his fingers across her bare shoulder. Her body stiffened, but she didn't make any quick movements. Still, she refused to look his way.

His other hand reached across him to her waist where it casually rested on her satin dress. She sucked in a quick breath. He grinned.

He slid his hand up her body. Slowly, as not to draw attention. He knew nobody would be able to see what was going on because of the dim lighting in the room and because of where they were seated. He didn't stop his hand until it touched just below her breast, and then it was not he who'd stopped it. Catherine's hand covered his tightly. She still

wouldn't look at him, but the grip on his hand let him know she didn't want it to go any further.

He kept it there for a few seconds without doing anything, but the erratic beat of her heart pounded fiercely against his palm. Moving his thumb out of her grip, he stroked the top of her hand, switching it to the tip of her fingers as he showed the same passionate affection to them.

Her grip loosened, and his fingers touched and stroked as he tried to bring pleasure to her, rubbing up and down each delicate finger. It didn't take too long before she mimicked his demonstration. Her fingers brought the same wonderful torture to him. Her chest heaved just as fast as his.

He allowed her to caress him until his staff grew large in his pants. She'd nearly brought him to losing control. Spreading his fingers, he entwined them with hers just to stop their stroking. She really shouldn't have given in, because now he wanted her even more. Was it really just last night when he had made love to her? The way his body reacted to her touch felt as if it was his first time all over again.

He had to get her alone. Soon!

Nick leaned over and whispered in her ear, "I want you, Kitty."

She shook her head, but didn't tear her eyes from the stage. "No. We cannot," she whispered.

"Kitty. I can't go on for very much longer without kissing you. Please?" The passion flowing through his body had actually reduced him to pleading.

"No, Nick. We still have a ball to attend this evening."



"Then get away from my father some time during the night and meet me privately."

She turned her head and met his gaze. Her face was very near his, which made his heart quicken even more.

"No, Nick. We cannot." She wrung her hand free from his and turned her whole body away, making it final.

Under his breath, he cursed. She wanted him as much as he wanted her. He knew it. Gritting his teeth from the ache in his loins, he vowed he'd meet her tonight if it took all of his charm to do it.

Yet ... he'd almost forgotten that one thing standing between them. His father.

Being raised as the first son of a duke, he learned to obey; learned to respect his elders. True, his father was dying, but he wasn't dead yet. And Nick couldn't do this to the man. He didn't want to be the reason his father's heart failed.

Closing his eyes, he prayed for strength and courage. He'd not make it through this night let alone this next little while without wanting to touch Catherine ... wanting to love her as his own.

But as the situation looked, that was utterly impossible.

## **Fourteen**

Nick stood against the wall with folded arms. On the dance floor, another man swept by with Catherine in his hold as they danced. As usual, guests crowded the ballroom at Lady Ruthaford's. He noticed a few acquaintances and wanted to strike up conversation, but he couldn't keep his eyes off Catherine long enough to do so.

Every time a different man came to claim her, his heart broke a little more. Yet he couldn't look away. Feasting his eyes on Catherine fed life into his very soul; kept him wanting to make it to the next day just to see her beautiful smile. Jealousy ate at him like a slow-growing disease ... Catherine's love the only cure.

Beside him, his father's stare turned toward the dancing couples, and Nick wondered just how much his father actually saw. The old man's mouth turned up at the corners, his foot tapped in rhythm to the tune the orchestra played.

"Father, how are you faring this evening?"

Grant met his gaze and smiled wider. "It's been an exemplary evening. One of the best I've experienced in a very long time."

Nick clapped his hand on his father's shoulder and squeezed. "I must admit, it's been a while since I've noticed that twinkle in your eyes."

The older man chuckled. "Catherine has a way of making me feel young again."

Nick's chest clenched. "Yes, she does." He glanced toward the middle of the dance floor again just to look upon her

beauty. "I've also noticed she's not the only person to make you feel different."

Grant arched his brow, his head cocked to one side.  
"Pardon me?"

He leaned in closer to personalize their conversation. "Who was the woman warming your bed last night?"

His father gasped, his body stiffening. Even his jaw hardened. "Why do you say that?"

"Do you not think I check on you from time to time?"

Grant straightened and folded his arms. "*That* is none of your concern."

"Father, there's no need to get snappish with me. I'm just worried about your welfare. Must I talk with this woman?"

"That's rubbish." His father scowled. "I cannot believe I'm being lectured by my son."

Nick chuckled. "Who is she? One of the upstairs maids?"

His father remained silent.

"One of the laundry maids, perhaps?"

Grant huffed and turned away, which made Nick chuckle again. "It is. I can tell." He scrubbed his hand over his chin.

"Let me guess ... she's Eleanor."

Over his shoulder, Grant threw him another scowl.

"All right, it's not her. Perhaps Mary?"

Grant spun around with his hands planted on his hips.

"Enough. Who the girl is does not matter."

Nick threw back his head and laughed harder.

His father grasped his arm. "Will you cease this insanity? I do not wish to draw attention."

Nick sobered. "Forgive me. It's ... well, it's a surprise to hear that you've been entertaining under the sheets. Last I'd heard, your, um, *equipment* wasn't in working order."

"Lately, it's working a little better."

Although Nick kept a smile on his face, his heart ached. This only meant one thing. Soon Catherine would be in Grant's bed.

All his humor disappeared and he leaned back against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest. Once Catherine married his father, life would cease to exist.

"What bothers you, Nick?"

He shrugged. "I worry about your health."

"No need. I get stronger every day."

Nick scrunched his forehead and studied his father. Why didn't he believe him? If his health improved, then why didn't his eyesight?

"Father? When are you planning on marrying Catherine?"

The lines in his father's face relaxed. A gentle smile touched his mouth. "Soon, I hope. We have not really talked about it." He met Nick's gaze. "Have you settled your mind about Catherine?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean—do you approve of my choice in women yet? Not too long ago you were extremely upset that I would choose a young woman."

Nick took a deep breath and slowly released it. "I will say this ... I do understand why you picked Catherine. She is a delightful and charming woman, and will make the perfect wife."

Grant chuckled and leaned against the wall. "I thought you'd come to that conclusion."

A knot formed in Nick's throat and pain pierced his heart. How could he go on each day without Catherine? Life without her was a life not worth living.

\* \* \* \*

The bumpy coach jilted Catherine against the side. She quickly righted herself and glanced at Grant across from her and Aunt Gertrude, softly snoring in the corner. The evening had been long, but enlightening. Nick had tried numerous times during Lady Ruthaford's ball to get her alone. Thankfully, she'd met a few new people and befriended one of them. Lady Allison Archibald was great company, and helped keep Nick away.

Of course, she wondered if Lady Archibald didn't have her eye on Ian. Catherine caught the other woman grinning from ear to ear whenever Ian came to join their group.

Because of her new friends, she was able to ward off Nick's pursuit. If she didn't take control, her emotions could get out of hand. Soon, it would be dangerous to have him so close.

A decision must be made. Immediately. Her future depended on it.

Yet an ache shot through her heart when she remembered the many women Nick had danced with tonight. They all looked at him with adoring eyes and pouty lips. During their dances, they had moved their bodies scandalously close. On a few occasions she'd been tempted to hurry over and separate them. Instead, she bunched her hands into fists and hid them

in the folds of her dress. Other times it hurt so much she had left the room.

She must get a handle on her emotions where Nick was concerned or it would certainly ruin her life.

When the wheel of the vehicle ran across another rock, she bounced on the seat again. Grant's gaze moved to her and he smiled.

"Did you have an enjoyable evening, my dear?"

"Yes. It was lovely."

"You were invited to many parties, were you not?"

"I was, Grant. Your friends welcomed me into their group with open arms." She frowned. "But..."

Blindly, he reached for her hand then smiled when he grasped it. "I hear despair in your voice, Catherine. What is it?"

The rhythm of her heart beat against her chest so hard she feared it matched the beat of a drum. She mustn't cower.

She glanced at Lady Gertrude who remained asleep. Lifting her chin she squared her shoulder. "Grant, I think we really need to discuss our ... impending marriage."

"What is it you'd like to talk about, my dear?"

"I ... I ... I cannot feel right about our engagement."

His eyes widened and he sat back, his gaze stayed on her whether he really saw her or not.

"Indeed?"

"Yes, Grant. Even before I arrived at Havenwood, I'd been having doubts, but my father pushed me to come to see if we suit."

His forehead crinkled. "And, you don't feel as if we suit?"

"No." Her answer came out low.

He folded his arms across his chest. "So do you expect me to call off our engagement?"

His tone of voice sparked a touch of anger. Perhaps she'd spoken out of turn ... but yet how else would he know her feelings?

"Grant, I'm letting you know how I feel. I know my father will sign the betrothal papers if you have them drawn, which leaves me no choice but to marry you."

Silence lasted between them for several minutes. Even Aunt Gertrude's snores seemed to soften to a mere whisper. Fear turned her throat dry and she bunched her hands into fists, praying he would free her from this engagement.

He took a heavy breath and shook his head. "I've always wanted you to be part of my family, Catherine. Do you not wish the same?"

Her heart clenched. "I ... I don't feel right. I love you—but not like a woman should love a man who's about to become her husband."

"Passionate love? You don't feel this for me?"

"Regretfully, no. I'm truly sorry, Grant."

He scrubbed his hand over his chin. "You do know most of the marriages in England are that way, right?"

"Yes, but that's not what I want."

He nodded. "You're young and fanciful. You want a fairytale marriage."

She lowered her head. "Yes."

"And marrying a duke isn't the fairytale most young girls your age dream about?"

Squeezing her eyes closed, she took a deep breath. This conversation wasn't going anywhere. Obviously, he wouldn't give in. Unshed tears stung her eyes and she blinked them away. Her future looked bleak. But did she have any other choice?

She focused on Grant. "I think of you as an uncle, and I have for several years. If you and my parents hadn't been so close, it would be different between us."

Silence stretched in the coach, the only sounds were those from the road and Lady Gertrude. Catherine's heart pounded quicker, and her palms moistened. Uncertainty lodged in her throat, making it hard to swallow. The silence tortured her.

After a few more quiet moments, she cleared her throat. "I'd thought..."

"Yes?"

"I, um, had thought that you might make me your ward, though."

A grin stretched across his face. "My ward?"

"Yes. My father rarely has time to spend in my proper upbringing, and since you are a trusted friend..."

Chuckling, he shook his head. "My dear, Catherine. That is out of the question. If you were my ward, it would be my responsibility to find you a wealthy husband. I've already done that for you—which is why the wedding is *not* going to be called off."

Her heart hit the pit of her stomach and crumbled. Obviously, he felt the same as her father. Was she the only person in this world who wanted love to come with marriage?



Releasing a pent-up sigh, she scooted to the corner of the seat, focusing her gaze on the thick curtain hanging over the window. She grasped her cloak tighter and bit her bottom lip, hoping to stem the tears burning her eyes.

"Catherine, dear. Your future may look bleak now, but I promise, in time you will see your father and I are doing what's best for you."

"If you say so."

"I do."

Silence filled the coach again, and after a little while, Grant's soft snores matched his sister's. Tears streamed down her cheeks and she wiped to keep them from marking her cloak. Could she eventually feel passionate love for Grant? And if she did, would her memories of Nick disappear? If what Nick suspected is true and his father could now perform the marriage act, would Grant ask who had been her first? It'd break his heart—and maybe kill him if he discovered Nick had bedded her.

Taking a deep breath, she calmed her fears. She'd have to take it one day at a time. And the first step was to make certain Nick stayed out of her life ... for good.

When they arrived home, she hurried to her room. Emily waited to help her change, but Catherine shooed her away. She wasn't ready to retire for bed. Not before she had a heart-to-heart talk with Nick. If she were to remove him from her mind—and heart—it would have to be done tonight.

After another hour crept by, she left her room. With soft steps, she made her way to Nick's quarters. She knocked and

waited, but he didn't answer the door. Cautiously, she opened the door and peeked inside.

Empty.

She sighed heavily and wandered through the house looking for him. Everyone had retired, it seemed. No one was about.

Before she gave up, she decided to search outside. She wrapped her cloak around her and hurried out the side door of the drawing room. A light fog had settled over the yard, limiting her vision. Shadows danced around the house while a gentle breeze drifted through the air.

"Nick?"

She dared not call too loudly as to have someone else catch her. Explaining this to Mrs. Berkley wasn't high on her list of things to do tonight.

The grass softened her step as she made her way toward the gazebo. Many times she'd caught Nick sitting there, watching her as she and his brothers rode the estate.

As she neared, the scent of tobacco tickled her nose. A shadow of a man stood against the rail, the red glow from his cigar giving away his hideaway.

She stopped. Taking a deep breath, she reminded herself she must speak with him. Although they'd be alone in the dark once again, this *had* to be done!

"Kitty, come here."

Her heart accelerated and her palms moistened. Squaring her shoulders, she moved toward the gazebo, trying to convince herself she must be brave and in control.

The tip of his cigar was barely enough to light his countenance. If the fog hadn't covered the moon, she'd be able to see him better. But his face was toward her, and by the way her skin danced with awareness, she knew his heated stare was on her, too.

"You were looking for me, my dear Kitty."

\* \* \* \*

Nick held his breath as she came closer. His libido jumped to life and it was all he could do to keep from grabbing and pulling her against him. He'd thought about her all evening and now she was within reach.

Finally, she stood in front of him, her body straight as a board. He wished there was more light by which to see her hypnotizing eyes, her lovely smile.

"Yes, Nick. I need to talk to you."

He dropped his cigar, crushing it with his heel, then moved toward her. The moment he touched her, he wrapped her in his arms and held her tight. She gasped, her head tilted back.

He grinned. "I have a few things I need to say to you also." He bent his head and captured her lips with his.

She remained stiff, even her lips. He'd soften her in no time. He trailed kisses from her mouth to her chin, then to her ear, nibbling on the lobe. "Tonight when I saw you dance with those other men I went half mad with jealousy."

Her breathing became deeper. "You have no right..."

"Ah, but convince my heart of that, my dear."

Soon, her hands slid up his chest and linked around his neck. "This is impossible. Our affair cannot go on."

"But I cannot stop it either. Whenever I see you, I must have you in my arms and taste your sweet lips." He nibbled at her neck. Goosebumps rolled over her skin and brushed his mouth. He flicked his tongue in the crook of her neck and a soft sigh came from her. "I want to make you mine again—just as I did last night.

She slid her hands back to his chest and pushed, tearing herself away from his kisses. "Nick, no! We have to stop this. Now."

He laughed. "We have only just started."

Shadows danced across her expression, making it hard to read her thoughts. Usually, he could tell when she was aroused, but not now.

"No." She stepped back. "We must not do this any more. This is the very reason I came to talk to you."

He sighed. "Then tell me what you came to say."

"Nick, we cannot see each other any longer. You cannot look at me like you've been doing, and you must never, ever kiss me or touch me in any personal way."

He shook his head. Although she spoke the truth, his body wouldn't be able to bear the distance. Holding and kissing her was like feeding life into him. He needed her beside him. He needed to make her happy.

"Kitty, my sweet." He stroked her shoulders. "You know it could never happen. We are strongly attracted to each other. Your sweet lips and soft body keeps me coming back for more. Forgive me, but I can't stop myself from wanting you. I can't go on without you."

Bending his head, he kissed her once more, wrapping her in his arms. She struggled at first, but the more his lips moved over hers, the more her body relaxed. He pressed her closer and she gasped. When her mouth opened, he slipped his tongue inside. A moan escaped from her and her body melted in his arms.

He devoured her mouth and she clung to him, answering him back with an urgent appeal. He wandered his hands up and down her back, then moved one between their bodies to open her cloak. She must have read his mind because she loosened the tie at her neck and released the outer garment. It slipped off her shoulder and fell around her feet.

Then he moved his hands all over her, caressing, stroking, and cupping her breasts. She arched, allowing him to take more. He captured her lips again in a heated kiss.

"Oh, Nick. I want you," she mumbled.

After taking her in his arms, he pushed her against the wooden frame of the gazebo and pressed his body to hers. A moan sprang from her throat and she clutched his shoulders. With great urgency, he lifted her skirt and held the material with his body as he touched her legs and buttocks. He yanked down her bloomers and she stepped out.

He slid his palms over her bare thighs and she let out another moan. Once he pushed his fingers over her womanly mound to the slick folds of her body, she cried out his name. He placed his mouth over hers to keep her quiet.

As he stroked between her legs, she fumbled with his trousers, quickly releasing his shaft. When she held him in her hand, he almost lost control.

Groaning, he broke the kiss. As he lifted her, he spread her legs and settled himself inside her. She praised the Lord, and this time he didn't care who heard. The fervent sound made him insane with passion and he wanted to devour every part of her, yet the urgency flowing through him took over. Her willing participation as she moved her hips with his and the soft gasps coming from her was what drove him over the edge.

As her passionate sobs increased, he clamped his hands on her hips and drove into her faster. Within seconds, he lost control, spilling his seed inside.

He rested his head in the crook of her neck and regulated his breathing, listening to her ragged breaths. Silently, he cursed his lack of control. He shouldn't have taken her here, and he should have made the moment last longer ... much longer. It had been risky taking her now, but damn it was sensual.

After several minutes passed, she pushed away from him and righted her dress. She bent and picked up her bloomers. She straightened, looking at him.

"Nick?" She breathed deeply. "What did we just do?"

Chuckling softly, he answered, "We moved the earth, my sweet."

She shook her head. "This wasn't supposed to happen. It shouldn't have happened."

He kissed her lips softly. "Forgive me, but it did happen, and if I could do it over again, I would. You're just too tempting, my darling."

Her chest heaved with fast breaths. Although he couldn't see the expression on her face, her stiff body told him she wasn't too pleased with his answer.

"Nick, do me a favor, please."

"Depends on what you ask."

"Don't ever touch me again. Tomorrow your father will announce our engagement and so we can never be like this." Her voice broke. She turned and ran from him.

He took a step to grab her, but stopped. What was he doing? When his father announced their engagement, she was lost to him forever. His heart twisted as a painful ache grew inside him. He bunched his hands into fists and swore. His life was ruined. He'd never be able to let her go, yet he couldn't claim her.

How could he bear to watch her marry his father? There was only one way. He had to leave and never return. Tonight.

Loneliness took on a whole new meaning and he feared he'd never recover.

## **Fifteen**

Loud voices woke Catherine. She sat up with a start, her heartbeat quickening. Voices raised in panic floated from down the hall.

She slid out of bed and grabbed her robe, slipping into it as she rushed to the door. Before she reached it, it flew open and Emily hurried in, her face void of color.

"Emily? What's wrong?" Catherine grasped her maid's cold and shaky hands.

The girl's eyes were wide. "There was an accident ... He could have died," she muttered.

"Emily." She squeezed her maid's hands. "Tell me what happened. Who could have died?"

Her lips trembled. "Lord ... Castledale."

Fear gripped Catherine's heart, lodging a knot in her throat. "Nick?"

Emily nodded. "Late last night he packed and left. He'd planned to move into his townhouse, but he was in an accident."

Suffocation overwhelmed her, making it harder to breathe. "What happened?"

"His carriage lost a wheel. The vehicle plunged down a hillside and Lord Castledale was thrown."

Catherine sucked in a quick gasp of air. "Oh, Lord, no!" Tears swam in her eyes. "Is ... is he all right?"

Emily twisted her hands against her stomach. "Yes, but—"

"But what?"

"The doctor says his arm may be broke and ... and..."



Catherine's heart knocked painfully against her ribs.  
"What?"

"He ... he's been unconscious since he was found and brought here." She shook her head. "The doctor says if Lord Castledale doesn't awaken ... he may die."

Darkness threatened to close off Catherine's vision, but she fought the urge to swoon. Nick needed her. She needed to be by him. To hold his hand. To encourage him not to give up. *He can't die!*

She swung toward her armoire. Dizziness swelled in her head but she fought it and on shaky legs made her way toward her closet. "Emily, help me dress. I must go see him."

Although upset, Emily still made certain Catherine looked presentable when she left the room not more than thirty minutes later. Catherine almost ran to Nick's room, but was stopped by Gregg and Ian who paced the hall outside the door.

"The doctor is still with Nick," Gregg told her.

She blinked back the tears. "How is he ... really?"

Ian shook his head. "It doesn't look good."

"What in the devil happened?" She flipped her hands in the air. "I know the wheel came off, but how? Was it possible the groom was careless?"

Gregg shrugged. "The constable is looking into the matter as we speak. He agrees that the wheel shouldn't have just come off. He thinks it was tampered with."

She gasped, her hand flying to her throat. "Who would do such a thing?"

"Nobody knows." Gregg scrubbed his hand over his chin.

She glanced up the hall then back to Gregg. "Where is your father? Is he inside with Nick and the doctor?"

"No," Ian answered instead. "He's had another attack. We think it was the news of Nick's accident that gave Father another relapse. I fear for his recovery as well."

"His valet," Gregg continued, "said Father was fine when he went to bed, but early this morning he was found disoriented and breathing ragged."

"Oh, Lord." She covered her face with her hands, her tears streaming down her cheeks. This couldn't be happening!

Warmth enveloped her when two solid arms wrapped around her. She recognized Gregg's scent of spice. Resting her head on his shoulder, she gave into his offer of comfort and wrapped her arms around his waist. Against her forehead, his gentle lips brushed against her skin and his embrace tightened.

"All will be well, Catherine. I know it," he whispered in a deep voice almost foreign to her.

She glanced up and met his gaze. Dark eyes. A familiar look. *Dear Lord, no!* She couldn't handle this. He couldn't be infatuated with her, too. Hopefully, she was mistaken.

Pulling away, she wiped the moisture on her cheeks. She sniffed. "I heard Nick was leaving for his townhouse. Do you know why?"

As quickly as it came, Gregg's expression of desire left. Sadness dimmed the color of his eyes again. "No, but it's not out of character for him to do that. In fact, Nick usually stays at his townhouse. He rarely lives here at the country estate."

Ian walked up to her and patted her shoulder. "Why don't you go downstairs and have breakfast. Mrs. Berkley and Aunt Gertrude are there right now. I'm certain they'll want your company."

She nodded and turned. Taking slow steps she made her way down the stairs to the dining room, her heart heavy with emotion. She couldn't lose Nick. Of course, by marrying Grant she would have lost the one man she'd ever loved. But that was preferable to his death.

Neither woman acted overjoyed to see her. Catherine felt that Mrs. Berkley still harbored anger toward her because of the horse race a while ago—and because Catherine never asked for her companionship any longer. Truth be told, the only company she wanted was Nick's. Mrs. Berkley would have heart failure if she ever found out Catherine's secret.

Lady Gertrude pushed away from the table and wandered to the window. Outside the clouds were dark. Off in the distance thunder rumbled. Tree limbs bent as the wind rushed through them. Against the window, the light sprinkle of rain tapped in rhythm.

"Today's gloomy weather certainly fits. Don't you agree, Catherine," the older woman asked.

"Yes, I do."

Lady Gertrude glanced over her shoulder at Catherine and smiled. "Well, we mustn't give up hope that our loved-ones will recover from the incidents that have happened today." Her voice cracked as tears gathered in her eyes.

Catherine stood and hurried to the older woman, giving her a hug. "We must pray they will have a quick recovery."

The older woman's lower lips trembled, and she nodded.

"Praying is a very good thing at a time like this."

Catherine's father's loud voice bounced off the walls.

Catherine jumped and turned toward him. He held a bible in his hands and had the black clergy robe on today. Inwardly, she groaned. He hadn't honored her request to leave yesterday afternoon after all. How could she make him leave now when Grant and Nick needed him the most?

"Father, have you been to see them?"

He held a stern expression. His eyes didn't give her any hint of his thoughts—neither did the straight line of his mouth.

"Yes. I have offered a prayer for both."

She left Lady Gertrude's side and walked on shaky legs toward her father. "How are they?"

"Still the same. His Grace is resting, but his breathing is shallow. Lord Castledale continues to show no signs of consciousness."

Fear clutched her chest, making it difficult to breathe. Tears stung her eyes, and she clasped her shaky hands together in attempt to hold them still. She stopped near a chair just in case her legs failed to hold her.

Her father must have seen through to her heart, or at least read her mind. By the arch of his bushy eyebrows and narrowed eyes, she figured he must know what emotions ran rapidly through her.

"All we can do right now is pray," he said in a solemn tone.

The next hour crept by. Gregg and Ian stayed with Nick or their father, and they wouldn't allow her to go into the room.

But her father watched her with judgmental eyes and made certain she didn't leave his side. It seemed she couldn't please him ... not since her mother died anyway. For being a man of God and preaching about forgiving and forgetting, he certainly wasn't practicing his teachings at home.

Finally, Catherine could stand no more. Sewing on her sampler began to gnaw at her nerves and didn't help her patience at all. Her father read out of the good book while they sat in the parlor, but only managed to make Lady Gertrude and Mrs. Berkley fall asleep. Catherine's eyelids drooped, also, so she excused herself to go up to her room.

Once she reached the stairs, heavy footsteps came up behind her. She glanced over her shoulder to see her father, his angry eyes glaring right through her.

"I would like to have a word with you," he said in a low voice.

"Actually, Father ... you never have just *one* word. It's more like several."

He grasped her arm and pulled her into the library, then closed the door behind him. His nostrils flared. His eyes darkened.

Sucking in a breath, she clenched her hands. "What is it, Father?"

"I would like to know why you loosened the carriage wheel on Lord Castledale's vehicle."

She gasped and stumbled backward. "Excuse me? Why would you think I did that?"

"I saw you leave the house last night. I saw you go toward the carriages."

Her heart dropped. What else had he seen? "So you assume I tried to kill Nick?"

In two strides, he stood before her. His heated gaze nearly scorched her.

"I cannot fathom why you would want to kill your lover, other than you're demented."

She swung her hand to slap his face, but he caught it before it hit its mark.

"How dare you insinuate..." she seethed.

"My dear daughter, your actions speak louder than your words. Since coming to say at Havenwood, you've turned into a jezebel."

Tears filled her eyes, her heart crumbling with each beat. "And this is *my* fault? Have you forgotten who wanted me to come here?"

"Your mother and I wanted you to marry Grant."

"Exactly ... which is why I'm still here."

"Yet you have been carrying on behind Grant's back with Nicholas."

A tear slipped down her cheek. "And so why are you accusing me of trying to kill him? Nothing you say makes sense, Father. If I'm having an affair—as you think I am—why would I want to kill him?"

He huffed and raked his fingers through his hair. "I don't know. But you're showing the signs..."

She blinked. "Signs? What signs?"

"Of insanity."

"How? I still don't understand."

He growled and spun around, marching toward the window. "Your mother was on the brink of insanity right before she was killed. Now you're displaying the same signs."

Confusion clouded her mind and she wiped her wet cheeks. "Father, I wish I knew what you were talking about. Nothing was wrong with Mother."

He shook his head. "You couldn't see it. You didn't know what to look for. I do. Your mother did, too." He turned his glare at her. "I will need to watch you closely before another so-called *accident* happens."

She clutched the sides of her head, a scream ready to burst from her chest. Instead, she breathed slower, trying to calm the raging inferno inside her. "No, Father. Once again, you are wrong. I am *not* insane!"

She hurried out and ran up the stairs to her room. After slamming the door, she leaned against it and closed her eyes. Tears dripped down her face and her chest ached with sobs that begged release. But she wouldn't. Her father didn't deserve the energy crying would take from her.

Deep in her heart, she knew he was wrong. The confusion swimming in her head was because of him; not the dreaded disease her mother may have had!

\* \* \* \*

Catherine lifted her head from the pillow and peered toward the window through half-closed eyes. Darkness had covered the land as she'd slept the day away. Her father's accusations and the confusion lodged in her chest drained her of everything.

She scooted to the side of the bed and sat on the edge. A tray of food had been set upon her nightstand, probably cold by now. Rubbing her eyes, she yawned then stretched her arms over her head. She moved to the washstand and splashed water on her face, hoping to revive herself. It helped only slightly.

As she moved around her room turning up the lamps, a light tap came upon the door. She jumped, her breathing quickening. It had better not be her father...

"Who is it?"

"Catherine, it's me, Gregg."

Her heart pounded in a painful rhythm. Had he come to give her bad news about Nick? On shaky legs, she walked to the door and opened it. Only a few lamps were lit in the hallway, casting shadows everywhere. Gregg looked so much like Nick right now—his angular jaw, dark hair and fine physique. A lump rose to her throat, almost cutting off the air. How she wished it was Nick.

"Wha ... what's wrong?" Her voice cracked. "Is it Nick? Grant?"

He shook his head and ran his fingers through his hair. "There's still no change in their conditions." His gaze locked with hers. "I ... I needed someone to talk to other than Ian. May I come in?"

Although it wasn't proper, and Mrs. Berkley would give her a good scolding if she discovered Catherine had let a man in her room, she opened the door and motioned for him to enter. The sad, lonely expression on his drawn face made her



want to help—made her want to be the one to comfort him as he'd always done when they were younger.

He sat on the sofa and patted the empty space next to him. "Join me?"

As she stepped to the piece of furniture, the door softly clicked closed behind her. He looked at her differently now. No longer did he have the solemn glaze to his eyes. His lips were not pulled in a tight line, but relaxed and turned up slightly at the corners. By the fierce rhythm of her heart and moist palms, she knew she should tell him to leave.

When she reached his side, he grasped her hand and pulled her next to him. She hitched a breath and landed on the sofa, her leg brushing his. Gregg kept her hand in his, even adjusted it and entwined their fingers.

Unease settled in her stomach. This was wrong. She didn't have those kinds of feelings for him. Obviously, he didn't feel the same.

"Gregg, I don't think..."

"Catherine, I appreciate your friendship right now. If you weren't here during this time, I don't know what I'd do."

She creased her forehead. Could she have read him wrong? Perhaps his intentions were proper after all. She swallowed the lump of fear forming in her throat and tried her best to smile.

"Although I wish your family didn't have to go through this, I'm happy to be here with you, too. During times like these we need people we love around us."

He nodded and squeezed her hand. "My thoughts exactly."

"Has—" Her throat squeaked and she cleared it. "Has the doctor said any more about Nick?"

"No. Just that time will tell." He shrugged. "Nick sustained a serious head injury when he was thrown from the vehicle."

Tears stung her eyes. It was her fault he'd been leaving last night. If only she hadn't made love to him. If only...

"Catherine." Gregg cupped the side of her face, his thumb stroking her cheek. "He will be all right. He's strong and will survive."

"But what about Grant? Your father is not as strong, and you know as well as I this might be the very thing that takes his life."

"Father's not going to die until he knows Nick is all right."

She gave him a smile. "You sound so positive."

"I am about this." He cupped her chin. "And you must be also. You must believe in good things."

She hiccupped a laugh. "You don't know how hard that is, especially when my father has made it difficult for me to find my own pleasant thoughts."

He pulled her against him, his arms tightening around her shoulders in a hug. For a moment, she wanted to forget these ridiculous ideas that Gregg might be infatuated with her and let him comfort her. But the moment she allowed her shoulders to relax, his hands caressed her back, moving lower each second. Scandalously lower.

"Catherine," he whispered in her ear, his lips brushing her lobe. Shivers danced over her, but it was nothing like the way her body reacted when Nick did this.

"Let me help you forget about your father," he continued. "I, too, have noticed the glares he throws at you, and I want to be your protector." He pressed his mouth against her neck in a light kiss. "Will you permit me?"

"Gregg..." She tried to pull away from him, but only managed a few inches—just enough to look closely into his face. His gaze dropped to her mouth and she panicked. "We should not—"

Before she could finish her sentence, his lips covered hers. She stiffened and pressed the heels of her palms against his chest, but he only tightened his grasp on her shoulders as his mouth moved back and forth across hers.

*No!* This could not be happening!

She turned her face away and his kiss landed on her cheek.

"Gregg, please don't. This is not right and you well know it." Her tone of voice was stronger this time.

His breath fanned her cheek, hot and ragged. He leaned his forehead against hers, his eyes closed. Within a few seconds he pulled away. The look of lust he'd shown only moments ago had been replaced with a scowl.

"I should have suspected earlier," he snapped.

She moistened her cotton-dry throat. "Suspected what?"

"That you loved my brother more than me."

Her heart picked up rhythm again, but this time for entirely different reasons. "Gregg, don't be ludicrous. I feel the same for Ian as I do you."

His eyebrow arched. "Ian? You think I'm speaking of him?"

"But of course."

"No, Cat. I'm referring to Nick."

She tried hard to remain in control ... to try and keep her expression solemn. He could not know her true feelings.

"Nick? Why would you think that?"

He stood and walked to her bed, stopping at the foot as he touched the wooden frame. "I've seen the way you look at him. I've especially noticed the way he can't keep his eyes off you."

"But..." She swallowed hard. "But I'm to be married to your father."

He spun around and marched toward her. When he reached her he grasped her arms. "All that has changed. None of us expect him to be alive much longer. I'm certain Nick has fancied the idea of having you for himself, although he knows he can't."

"You are sounding as insane as my father." She moved her arms and broke the contact.

He shook his head. "Nick wants you, but knows the woman he marries will have to come from a wealthy family. He knows I'm in love with you, Catherine, and he'll do anything to keep us apart."

She covered her mouth before a sob broke free. Tears welled in her eyes. How could she not have thought of that? Nick could never be hers, even after Grant dies. Nick needed to marry a woman of abundance ... not a lowly vicar's daughter. That's how it was done with the aristocracy in England.

Spinning around, she blinked her eyes, willing the tears to disappear before her true feelings were expressed.

Gregg let out an arduous sigh. "Catherine, forgive me. I was out of line." His footsteps echoed on the wooden floor, then his warm hand rested on her shoulder. "The truth is, we are made for each other. More so than you and Nick."

An incredible ache grew in her chest, threatening to crumble her to the floor. "Please leave," she whispered, brokenly.

He squeezed her shoulder. "Will you think about what I've said? I love you, Catherine. I have since we were young. When my father dies, I want to marry you."

The catch in his voice made her heart clench even tighter. Tears slipped down her cheeks. She couldn't speak due to the knot in her throat. All she could do was shake her head.

After a few moments passed, Gregg walked to the door and exited. Once the door closed, she sobbed into her hands, hoping to hide the noise.

He was right. She could never have Nick now. Not as her husband anyway. But she couldn't let him out of her life yet.

Swiping away the tears, she gritted her teeth. Nick needed her now! And by damn she wouldn't let him down. Especially when his very life hung on a thin thread.

She took soft steps to her door then opened it. The hallway looked empty. Hopefully, Gregg had retired to his room and not gone to Nick's.

On tiptoes, she made her way up the hall toward Nick's room. Nobody paced outside his door, nor sat on a chair as if guarding him from visitors. Her heart picked up rhythm.

When she opened the door, it made no sound. The ragged breaths coming from her were the only noise in the hall. A

few candles let out a dim light over the room. The heavy drapes were pulled closed over the windows, not allowing any light to shine forth. But she knew her way to his bed. Not as well as he knew her room...

She dismissed the indecent thought. She was here to encourage him to recover. To tell him she loved him—even if nothing would come of it. If Gregg knew she and Nick would never become husband and wife, certainly Nick had figured this out.

He lay still as death on the bed. The cover had been pulled up to his bare shoulders, his arms resting on the outside of the blankets, one bandaged in white. Scratches coated his face and arms. A knot swollen on his forehead right above his right eye looked tender, and it was her first instinct to kiss it better. But she resisted.

"Nick?" she whispered as she slid her hand into his. She sat on the edge of the bed and stroked his fingers. "I pray you can hear me, because I fear I won't be able to say this again." She swallowed hard and blinked back the tears welling in her eyes. "I want you to know I love you. No matter what happens. And I understand why you felt you had to leave last night. I wish things could be different between us, but Gregg made me realize our love could never be. It's best I marry your father." Her voice broke so she cleared her throat. "If your father dies before we wed, then I will return to my home. I couldn't bear seeing you married to another woman."

She bent and kissed his hand. "Please never forget I love you."

Always, My Love  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

Saying goodbye was more painful than she'd imagined.  
Her chest ached so much she thought she would die. Tears  
streaked down her face as she walked away from the bed.

Once again, her future didn't look bright. And death would  
determine whether she married or not.

## **Sixteen**

The pounding in his head pulled him from a foggy haze. As if coming through a tunnel, sounds became clearer, as did the horrendous pain throbbing throughout his body. He recognized Gregg's voice and Catherine's father. A third voice he could not identify mingled with the others.

Fighting the pain consuming his skull, he struggled to open his eyes. A warm hand enclosed around his and squeezed. In soft tones, Gregg urged him to awaken as the good vicar murmured a verse from the Bible.

Once his eyes opened, white light pierced through his vision, so he quickly closed them. Good Lord. Had he been trampled?

"Come on, Nick. Open your eyes. Talk to us. Let us know you're all right."

His brother's voice coaxed him to try again. A strong pound hammered in his head, but he tried one more time to open his eyes. He blinked and soon shadows turned into shapes, and faces appeared. Gregg, the reverend and his father's physician stood around his bed.

Gregg smiled. "Welcome back."

The doctor patted Nick's shoulder. "How do you feel?"

He tried to lift his arm to rub his forehead, but a band kept it against his body. He glanced down to see it in a sling. It was as if great weights secured his arm, but at least he managed to move his fingers.

"What happened?" His voice came out in a hoarse, raspy whisper.



"Don't you remember the carriage accident?" the Vicar asked.

Nick squeezed his eyes closed and tried to think. He'd loaded his trunks and climbed in the carriage. Fog had thickened that night, but he had instructed the driver to take him to his townhouse, nonetheless. Heaviness grew in his chest. He'd lost Catherine. Their love could never be.

Needing to be far away as soon as possible, he'd commanded his driver to go faster. Soon the carriage tilted and threw him against the door. Timothy's scream pierced through the night.

He groaned. "Is Timothy all right?"

Silence lasted much too long, so he peeked at the men. All wore frowns. His heart clenched.

Gregg shook his head. "He wasn't as fortunate, Nick. He died before morning."

Turning his head on the pillow, he shut his eyes again, hoping to block everything out. Hoping to wish the past to reverse so he could make things right. If he hadn't pushed Timothy so fast...

Gregg squeezed his hand again. "I'm sorry, Nick."

Tears burned behind his lids, but he gritted his teeth and tried to control his emotions.

"Nick, there's something else."

He didn't dare look. Hell, he didn't even dare ask.

After a couple seconds of silence, Gregg cleared his throat. "Father had another attack."

The heaviness in his chest doubled, making it difficult to breath. All this because of his selfishness.

He swallowed to moisten his dry throat then looked back at his brother. "How is he?"

"Not so well this time."

Nick took a ragged breath. "I must see him."

Behind Gregg, the doctor shook his head. "Not until you've gained some strength."

Even though it pained him to do so, he aimed his glare at the doctor. "Then tell me how to gain my strength so I may see my father before he dies."

The doctor instructed Nick's manservant to fetch his broth, posthaste. For the next little while, Nick struggled with his pain as the physician poked and prodded, trying to find if bones were broke. He came to the conclusion that Nick's arm had only been bruised. Yet Nick wanted to argue. His heart had been damaged also.

Would he ever forgive himself for causing the driver's death? And what of his father? Would his father be on death's door if Nick hadn't tried to leave?

After eating one bowl of broth, he demanded more. Weariness overcame him as his stomach filled, but he fought to keep awake. He must see his father and apologize before he died.

He must make amends ... if only for his own well-being.

\* \* \* \*

*Rocking on her knees, she held her sides and stared at her mother lying still on the kitchen floor. Humming a childhood song, she willed her mother to open her eyes. To breathe. To be alive.*

*How many hours passed, she didn't know. Her legs grew numb, as had her mind. The moon disappeared and the sun's morning rays shone through the window. Her mother's blood seemed darker. Her face, paler.*

*Catherine's stomach heaved and she turned her face to keep from retching. Instead, she lost it on the floor, splattering her legs and nightgown.*

*Tears streaked down her cheeks and her body shook with silent sobs. What had happened? If somebody had broken into their house and killed her mother, wouldn't she have heard?*

*Slumping over her mother, she allowed herself to cry out loud. The stench of blood assaulted her senses and the sticky substance clung to her skin. But she didn't care. Right now she wanted to cry herself into oblivion.*

*The clip-clop of horse's hooves drew her back to reality. Her heart pounded a quicker rhythm. Somebody was here. They could assist her.*

*She straightened and tried to stand, but her numb legs wouldn't allow it. "Please help!"*

*Keeping her attention on the door, she held her breath. A familiar figure walked in and stopped. Father. She broke down and cried a fresh set of tears ... until she realized his shocked expression had turned to one of loathing.*

*His jaw hardened. His lips thinned. At his sides, he fisted his hands. A heated glare shot through his narrowed eyes.*

*"What have you done, daughter?"*

*She shook her head. "I've done nothing. I awoke to find ... this." She motioned her hands toward her mother.*

*He blew out a deep breath and ran his fingers through his hair. "Who else would have killed her, Cat?"*

*She sniffed. "I ... I'm certain I don't know."*

*"Everyone in town loved your mother. She had a huge heart and didn't have one enemy."*

*Her chest tightened—a different band tried to squeeze her breath this time. "What are you saying?"*

*"I'm saying you are the only person who held ill feelings."*

*She gasped, covering her mouth and shaking her head.*

*He continued. "You were upset at your mother and me because of your upcoming betrothal."*

*"No ... that's not true."*

*His bushy eyebrows drew together. "Don't deny it, child. Tell me you did not wish us both dead for what we did."*

*Tears streamed down her cheeks and she shook her head. "I never wanted the two of you dead. I only wanted to be released from the marriage agreement." She glanced at her mother, then to the poker still covered in blood. "No. I couldn't have done this. I would have remembered."*

*He wiped his moist eyes. "Get yourself cleaned. I'll locate the constable. Hopefully, he won't suspect you."*

*This time her legs obeyed her as she dragged herself up the stairs to her room. Tears flooded her eyes, but she refused to wipe them away. Could her father be right? Could she have killed her mother? True, she'd been extremely upset when her parents informed her of her impending marriage to Grant Fielding, but she wouldn't have killed. That wasn't in her nature.*

*Why wouldn't her father believe her? And what could she do to change his mind? Would he ever believe?*

The bedroom door banged shut, and Catherine bolted upright in the bed and grabbed her throbbing head. Only a dream...

Lately, the dreams of her mother were becoming more vivid, making her remember more. Making her feel much more heartache. Now was not the time for this, so why couldn't she forget?

Her maid bustled around the room and readied Catherine's clothes for the day. Although days ago Nick had awakened and was doing better, she didn't want to get out of bed. She didn't want to face Gregg again ... or Nick for that matter. Her heart couldn't take it.

She snuggled back into her covers, pulling the sheet to her chin. "Emily, I don't want to dress today. I want to remain in my room and have no visitors."

Her maid frowned. "But Miss Catherine, you cannot. His Grace is asking to see you."

Her heart leapt, then clenched. Would this be farewell?

She nodded and climbed out of bed. "Then we must not keep him waiting a minute longer."

Emily dressed her so fast she didn't put half of her under things on, nor did she worry over her hair. But Emily chased her around the room brushing her long mane anyway. By the time she headed out the door, she was somewhat presentable. She stopped abruptly in front of Grant's bedroom door. Ian and Gregg stood in front with long and intense expressions.

"How is he?"

Gregg shook his head and met her wide questioning eyes. "He's not good at all. He's completely blind now." He stopped when his voice shook with emotion.

Her eyes watered. "The doctor is with him then?"

Ian nodded and answered, "Nick is with him also."

Instead of having her heart quicken because of the knowledge she would see Nick again, relief washed over her. "Good. I'm certain it makes Grant feel better knowing Nick is here."

Gregg shrugged. "I doubt Father even knows. Father has been in and out of consciousness all night and morning long. The pain is just too great for him to bear." His voice cracked again and this time his eyes clouded over with tears.

Although she shouldn't, she stepped up to Gregg and wrapped her arms around him. He needed comfort right now, regardless of how she felt. Gregg clung to her for support. His body shook with silent sobs as he buried his face in the crook of her neck.

Tears leaked down her cheeks. Ian joined them, circling his arms around them both. They stayed this way until the doctor stepped out of Grant's room, then they broke apart.

"How is he?" Gregg asked, wiping the moisture from his face.

The doctor shook his head, his frown saying it all. "I'm afraid he doesn't have much time left. His illness has completely taken him over, and in Grant's weakened condition, his frail body cannot fight back any longer."

Catherine nodded. "Can I see him?"

"Yes. He's been asking for you. Hopefully, he'll stay conscious enough to talk. He's been in and out quite frequently because of the intense pain."

She proceeded into the bedroom. Candles were lit around Grant's bed, which made the room look as if death lurked in the shadows. Nick sat in a chair beside his father's bed with his head bent, resting on his steeped fingers as if he were praying silently. Her heartbeat surged from seeing him again.

Slightly messed, his hair appeared longer than she remembered. She wanted to run to him, take him in her arms and kiss him endlessly.

She stepped closer and the floor creaked. Nick's head snapped up. He looked at her with those beautiful deep blue eyes, and her heart quickened even more. They were sad eyes, even though his mouth turned up slightly into a welcoming smile.

"Hello, Kitty," he greeted softly.

"Hello, Nicholas." She stepped closer to the bed. She had to tear her eyes off his handsome form to look upon Grant's sickly body. Her breath caught in her throat. The color of his skin looked almost the same pallor her mother had when Catherine had found her murdered.

"Oh, Nicholas," she whispered brokenly. "How can he look so sickly when he has been so active lately?"

Nick stood and moved beside her. "It's the way this particular illness works. That's what the doctor told me anyway."

"It's hard to believe, isn't it?"

Although she wouldn't meet Nick's eyes yet, his stare was upon her. Tingles of awareness wouldn't be shooting over her body if it weren't. It scared her because she knew how easily she fell into his arms. *That* could never happen again—whether Grant lived or died.

Taking a deep breath for courage, she turned and met his gaze. "How are you faring? You look better then you did right after the accident."

He arched a brow. "You saw me?"

"Yes. Ian wouldn't let me in your room, so I had to sneak in."

His gaze traveled slowly over her face as if reacquainting himself with her features once again. "I'm feeling better."

"And what about now? Are you handling everything?"

"I have prepared myself for this moment for a while and so I'll be strong."

"I wish your brothers were better prepared."

"I don't think they wanted to understand what was happening to father."

She glanced back at Grant. "I—I've—been worried about you. When I heard you'd been in an accident and almost killed..." Her voice broke.

He stroked his knuckles along the side of her face, the color of his eyes warming. "It's good to know you care."

"Of course I care. After all we've been through, how could I not?" she whispered.

"You knew why I wanted to leave?"

She nodded. "I don't blame you. At the time, I thought it was the right decision also."



Sadness touched his eyes. "My hasty determination caused such a traumatic effect. Timothy died, and now my father..."

She opened her mouth to reply but Grant's moan stopped her. Both she and Nick rushed to the bed.

"Father?" Nick asked lovingly. "Is there anything I can get you?"

Grant's eyes remained closed as he shook his head. "Nothing."

She sat beside him and took hold of his hand. "Grant? I'm here now."

"Sophia? Is that you?" Grant's voice rose in excitement.

Her heart dropped. "No, Grant, it's Catherine."

"Catherine? What are you doing here? Why aren't you in school? I'm not paying those teachers good money so you can gallivant all over London, you know."

She snapped her attention to Nick. He shook his head, worried lines creasing his forehead. She looked back at Grant. "But Grant, I'm out of school, remember? When I turned eighteen they passed me."

"No, no, young lady. Don't be telling me stories. You are fourteen years old, and so don't think you are going to pull my leg."

Nick tugged on her arm and motioned with his head for her to come to the corner of the room with him. She followed. When they were far enough away from Grant, Nick told her, "I think he has lost his mind. When he talked to me earlier this morning, he talked as if I were still a young boy. Kitty, I think this illness has made him lose some of his memory."

She sighed heavily. "I've noticed this lately, too, but then he'd come back to the present and everything would be all right." She paused, then asked, "Now what do we do?"

His arms slid around her shoulders, bringing her closer to him for a hug, but only a loose one. "We will have to play along. There's nothing else we can do."

Her heart quickened, but she couldn't let this comforting hug get out of control. Reluctantly, she pulled away. "All right. I'll do it."

For the rest of the day, Grant floated in and out of his memories of yesteryear, and everyone in the household played along. It was especially hard for Gregg and Ian and they left the room quite a few times with eyes filled with tears. Nick had tears, also, but bore it with his head held high.

Catherine only had a hard time when guilt overrode her feelings, which was quite a bit. Why couldn't she have shown Grant more love? She'd promised Nick to make his father happy, but she'd failed because of her selfishness.

She took breaks during the day to rest or just to be by herself, riding her horse around the estate. She wasn't the only one who needed this private time because she saw Gregg and Ian out at different times during the day as well, but Nick would not leave his father's side.

After the dinner meal, she decided it was time to go upstairs and force Nick to take a few moments to be by himself. Gregg and Ian told her they weren't planning on visiting with their father yet, so she decided to make Nick leave for a while.

She entered the room quietly and walked toward Nick. He still sat in the chair beside the bed, still in the same position he was earlier. The only thing different was his body shook with silent sobs. She stood in front of him and touched his shoulder. He didn't look up, but reached out and wrapped his arms around her waist, burying his face against her breasts as he cried.

She threaded her fingers through his long, raven black hair as she held his head. He held her tighter. Tears formed in her eyes and a lump came to her throat.

"Nick?" she whispered in a tight voice. "You really need to be by yourself for a while."

When his crying ceased, he pulled away and looked up at her. "He's now back to when my mother was still alive."

"Oh Nick, no." She caressed the side of his face lovingly, wiping away the tears from his cheeks.

"He thinks I'm a young boy, and he wants to talk to my mother. I don't know what to tell him."

"Are you going to be all right?"

He took a deep breath and released it before nodding. "Yes. It's just hard to see him this way."

"I know. That's why I want you to get away for a little while. It will do you a world of good. I promise."

He stood, still standing closely in front of her. His hands had been around her waist but he moved them up to the sides of her head as his thumbs gently stroked her skin.

"You're the only thing I need right now." He bent his head and brushed his lips gently across hers in a soft kiss, then

pulled away slightly. "But I do need a few minutes to be by myself. I won't be very long, I promise."

His words and the kiss hypnotized her. And may the Lord curse her, because she wanted more because of it. "No, really Nick. Take all the time you need."

He kissed her once more, making this one slightly longer. She leaned into him and moved her lips with his. Before she could enjoy it too much, he stepped away.

"I won't be able to go very long without wanting to be near you again."

"All right. I'll be here."

He gazed into her eyes for a few more minutes, then finally turned and left the bedroom.

She loved him so much. How could she leave him after Grant died? But she'd been selfish for too long. Nick needed a wealthy woman of nobility. She wasn't that woman and never would be.

## **Seventeen**

Grant slept the whole time Nick was gone. Sitting in the same chair Nick had been in, she stared at the man she'd thought of as an uncle and her heart cried for him. Why did death have to be so hard? True, he'd meet his maker a different way than her mother had, but the heartache was still very real.

She wished he'd open his eyes so she could give him a proper farewell. Not as the woman he'd wanted to marry, but the girl who'd adored him for many years.

When the bedroom door clicked open, she wiped away a stray tear. Nick walked in wearing a fresh shirt and pressed trousers. Although the room remained dimly lit, he still looked very handsome. Would she ever feel differently?

Nick came to her and pulled her out of the chair. He wrapped his arms around her, giving her a tender hug. "I missed you."

She laughed lightly. "Oh, Nick. You were not even gone for a whole hour."

He pulled back slightly and gazed into her face. "No, I mean I have missed you while laid up in bed." He stroked her cheek. "I know you missed me, too. Tell me, Kitty. Admit it."

"Yes, I have, but it cannot be right between us. It can never be, but—"

"Shh," he quieted her as his finger touched her lips. "There are no buts. Not anymore."

"This cannot be right between us."

"Maybe not now. But soon."

"We shouldn't think that way."

"Why? I believe he wants to die now. I believe he's giving up on his life now so we can be together—the right way."

Catherine couldn't believe what he was saying. Her heart burst with happiness, yet at the same time she worried it was too soon to feel such joy. After all, she wasn't the woman he should marry. Not a soon-to-be Duke.

"Kitty? Why are you so quiet? Don't you want me any longer?"

Her heart melted as she gazed into his narrowed eyes. She should let him know she loved him, but love wasn't enough. Not this time. When she went to speak, the bedroom door opened and in walked Gregg and Ian, startling her and making her jump out of Nick's arms.

Ian acted like he didn't notice the two embracing, but Gregg's gaze shot daggers at Nick, and he barely looked at her.

"How is Father doing?" Gregg snipped.

Nick stepped to the bed and looked at his father. "He hasn't changed, except for the fact that every time he wakes up, he's a little further back in time."

Gregg and Ian walked over to the side of the bed and sat beside their father, each touching him in a different place.

"How long did the doctor say until he dies?" Ian asked, in a choked voice.

"The doctor gave no indication, but did say it would be soon," Nick answered. "The disease in Father's body is taking over fast."

Catherine stood back away from the brothers. Shame and guilt crept through her mind and heart. She'd been caught in Nick's arms while the man she was supposed to marry lay dying. Gregg had noticed the look of love on her face a moment ago. Yet he knew how she felt, so why did he scowl so?

She still did not feel part of this family, especially now. Perhaps, she'd leave the brothers to be alone with their father. As she turned to leave, Nick reached out and grasped her arm. His eyes pleaded with her to stay, and God help her, she couldn't turn him down.

He pulled on her arm and she moved by his side. Sliding his arm around her, he held her in a friendly embrace, which made her feel a little better. She relaxed slightly and leaned against him as her arm slipped around his waist for support.

There was nothing said after that and the room remained quiet, except for the few times Grant moaned out in pain. Nick comforted her more than anyone could, and now as she watched Grant die, she was happy for the support from the man she loved.

\* \* \* \*

Catherine awoke the next morning feeling cramped, yet she was in somebody's arms and didn't want to move on the heavily cushioned love-seat. As she lifted her head, she opened her eyes. Nick lay against her. Across the room, Grant lay in bed. She glanced around the room, and luckily, Gregg and Ian were not present.

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*by Phyllis Campbell*

Looking back at the handsome man beside her, she smiled at his sleeping face. He was such a brave, strong, wonderful man, and she was so happy to be in love with him. Last night he didn't let her out of his reach the whole time Gregg and Ian were in the room. He kept asking her if she were all right or if she needed anything. He was so loving and caring and it made her fall deeper in love with him. She shouldn't have allowed it, but how could she stop it from happening?

She stayed awake last night until after the two brothers left to retire for the night, and weariness had taken her over. Nick had taken her over to the love-seat and sat beside her, and within time they fell asleep.

It was so nice to wake up in his arms, and she'd cherish this moment forever—even after he married another woman and went on with his life.

Slipping out of his arms as not to wake him, she stood and stretched her aching body before going over to check on Grant. He was deathly pale. Her heart dropped and she rushed to his side. His chest rose and fell in a soft rhythm. She let out the air she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

She sat next to him and softly touched his cheek. He jerked, which in turn made her jump also. His eyes fluttered open, but she knew he couldn't see anything anyway.

"Catherine? Is that you?"

Her heart sped up. This was the first time he had asked for her since his attack. "Yes, Grant. It is I."

He smiled. "How long have you been here?"

"Since yesterday morning." She continued to caress his frail face. "How do you feel?"



His smile disappeared. "I'm in a tremendous amount of pain. Is the doctor here? I need him to give me some more laudanum."

"He's probably still asleep. I'll get him. I put him in one of the extra bedrooms for the night." She moved to leave, but his hand grasped hers and stopped her.

"Catherine, my dear? Stay one minute longer. I want to remember the feel of your touch before I die."

"Oh, Grant." Her voice broke. "Don't say things like that. I don't want you to die."

"Now, now, my precious darling, don't fret. I have lived a good life and I'm ready to meet my maker in peace. I want to let you know that even though our engagement was very short, I was extremely happy the whole time, especially lately."

"Please forgive me for not loving you the way you wanted." Her voice shook.

"There's nothing to forgive. I just hope after I die, you'll be able to put all of your anger and hurt feelings aside and start a new life. I hope you'll forgive me for all I've done."

"But, Grant, there is nothing to forgive."

He squeezed his eyes shut and held his breath. His body stiffened as if another wave of pain washed over him. A minute passed by before he was able to breathe normal again. "Catherine, fetch the doctor for me."

"Yes, Your Grace." She hurried out of the room, her heart a little lighter than before, knowing he held no ill feelings against her.

\* \* \* \*

Nick awoke with a start when the bedroom door clicked close. He jumped up and looked around. Catherine was not here, so he assumed she'd been the one to leave. He glanced at his father's bed. A painful expression creased his aged face. He hurried to him.

"Father?"

Grant breathed slower. "Nick, is that you?"

"Yes. Are you all right?"

"I'm as well as could be expected for a dying man, I suppose."

Thank God, he'd returned to the present time. Nick almost cried out in relief, but the knot in his throat stopped him. "Did Catherine leave to get the doctor?"

"Yes." Grant blindly reached out his hand and felt around for Nick's, touching it, then grabbing onto it tightly. "Nick? Before they get here, I want to tell you something."

"What?"

"First, I want to thank you for all you've helped me with. I know some of the things I have asked of you have been despicable and you probably think I was half-insane for asking, but because you're a good son, you have done them obediently. But before I die, there is just one more thing I want you to do for me."

"Anything, Father."

"I know how much you care about Catherine. I know you're in love with her, although you don't want to admit it to me. I also know she's in love with you." He chuckled lightly.

"I may be blind, but I can still see. I want you to take Catherine as your wife after I die."

Tears gathered in Nick's eyes, the lump in his throat thickening. His heart burst with happiness and he wanted to cry aloud. "You're giving me your blessing?"

"Yes. I know you two will be happy together. Hopefully, within time you and Catherine will be able to forgive me for keeping you apart for so long. I know society will disapprove, since you are the eldest son and should marry for money. But don't follow in my path. I didn't marry for love, and I've lived a lonely life. Follow your heart, son."

A tear slipped down his cheek. "Thank you, Father. This is the best thing you have ever done for me. I do love her and I don't want to live without her."

"Then make her yours."

The knot in his throat tightened enough to keep words from escaping. He leaned over, gave his father a hug then kissed his cheek. Nick watched closely for any more signs of discomfort, but there seemed to be none. Then a peaceful look came over his father's face and he opened his eyes again.

"I can see," Grant exclaimed. "There's a bright light ahead of me, and I can see it." His mouth turned into a pleasant smile. "Elizabeth? Is that you?"

Chills shot up Nick's spine and tears fell in buckets from his eyes. His father was dying and the good Lord had sent his very own mother to take him to heaven with her.

Grant said nothing more, but slowly closed his eyes. And just like that, the breath left his lungs. Nick still held his

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father's hand and could actually feel the very life being taken away. It was as if his father took his hand away from Nick's grasp, yet his hand didn't move. As though a hand slipped gently from a glove.

He sniffed. "Father, I love you," he whispered brokenly before resting his head on his father's chest and sobbing out his anguish.

## **Eighteen**

"This is not proper, Miss Martin." Mrs. Berkley tossed Catherine a scowl as the old woman marched toward the closet with a satchel in her hand. "We must get you packed immediately."

Her heart pounded as fear climbed through her body, she grasped the older woman's elbow as she passed. "Stop. Don't touch my clothes. We aren't leaving."

Lines appeared on Mrs. Berkley's forehead, around her lips, and made crows feet in the corners of her eyes. "The Duke is dead, and you are now living with his three randy sons. If you stay any longer, your name will be tarnished. Rumors will fly through the *ton* and neither you—or your father will be able to hold your head in society. And I, for one, will not be your companion if that happens." Her chest heaved as she planted her hands on her beefy hips.

Catherine sucked in a quick breath. How could she stop Mrs. Berkley from packing? How could she stop her father from taking her back home? They were right. It wasn't proper ... but then again, she couldn't leave. Since Grant died, she'd waited for Nick to proclaim his love for her to the world; to ask for her hand in marriage on bended knee. It didn't matter that her mind told her it would never happen. Usually men with titles did not marry ladies without dowries.

And Nick was a Duke now. He would certainly be expected to marry one of the higher-class women—not a lowly country girl, especially now that everyone watched him with eagle eyes.

Moisture stung her eyes and she turned away from Mrs. Berkley. Her heart clenched in agony. Her bottom lip trembled, so she bit it to keep it still. Blinking, she tried to hold back the tears.

"What do you wish me to do, Miss Martin?"

A knot of emotions lodged in Catherine's throat. What did she wish? For everyone to go away. To be in Nick's loving and secure arms. To be told her girlish dream would come true and Nick would be her husband.

She cleared her throat. "Please, Mrs. Berkley, just one more day. It's too soon after the funeral."

"As you wish."

When the door clicked shut and she remained the only one in the room, she allowed the tears to stream down her cheeks. Her shoulders shook in silent sobs as she clutched the bedpost, her head resting on the smooth, round oak.

If she couldn't have Nick—how could she live? How could she go from one day to the next knowing he was courting another woman? Knowing he'd be making love to another woman and soon forget about her?

She sniffed. Plain and simple ... she couldn't go on. Nick had been her dream for as long as she could remember.

And to think she'd have to go back and live with her father? Impossible! She would not live with the man who thought she killed her own mother.

She tore herself away from the post and wiped her eyes. Something had to be done. Now.

Straightening her shoulders, she marched to the door, yanked it open and hurried toward her destination.

\* \* \* \*

*Fielding, old chap, you're in mourning for one year.* Nick glanced at his solemn reflection in the rain-splattered window. Outside, the wind blew hard against the glass. Trees bent so far they threatened to break. Heavy, dark clouds mirrored his tattered emotions.

His father had given him permission to take Catherine as his wife ... yet society would require him to wait twelve months to do it. He raised the glass of whiskey to his mouth and sipped. The alcohol had stopped burning as it slid down his throat. Just as he'd wished.

So why hadn't the pain in his heart subsided?

It had been a full day since they laid the former Duke in the earth—his final resting place. Now there was a new Duke; one who wanted to go against society and make himself happy. Would he disappoint his father by wanting to follow his heart so soon after the funeral?

A knock came upon the study door, announcing two people he didn't really want to see at this moment. Gregg and Ian walked in. Both moved to the liquor tray and fixed their drinks before taking a chair. The drab black mourning garb they were required to wear for the next year did nothing to help their dreary expressions. In fact, it made them gloomier.

During the funeral, Gregg hadn't left Catherine's side for one minute. Nick tightened his grip on his glass. How Nick had wanted to stand beside her, giving her the comfort and love he'd dreamed about for so long. But all eyes were upon

him, expecting him to act proper. To behave proper ... just as a Duke should.

Soon he'd claim Catherine as his love—and the rest of the world be damned.

Nick placed his drink on the oak desk, sat back in his chair and linked his fingers over his stomach. "Have all the guests departed?"

Gregg nodded. "Catherine saw the last one to the door an hour ago. She retired to her room soon afterward."

"She's certainly been a godsend. She's been so helpful these past several days." Nick massaged the ache in his bruised arm. "Don't know what I'd do without her."

Ian humphed and shifted in his chair, bringing his drink to his lips and gulping.

Nick scrubbed his hand over his unshaven chin. His brother had been acting this way for a little while. So different from the way he'd been with Catherine when she first arrived.

He leaned forward in his chair. "Ian? What ails you? Obviously, you have something on your mind."

His brother shot him a glare. "I don't wish to share."

Gregg met Nick's gaze, then switched to the younger brother. "You've been acting this way for a few days, mayhap even longer. Something is wrong."

"I think you should let it out, Ian." Nick pushed his fingers through his hair and leaned on the desk beside him. "Your temperament is annoying."

Ian huffed and jumped to his feet. In two long strides, he stood in front of Nick. "Annoying? Well, what irritates me is



seeing both of my brothers fawning over a woman who just may be insane."

Nick bunched his hands into fists. "Explain yourself before I release my temper and you find yourself on the floor."

"That ... woman," he ground out, motioning toward the closed door, "is not in her right mind."

Gregg bounded to his feet and quick as lightening stood in front of Ian. He grasped his younger brother's shoulders and gave him a hard shake. "Why do you say this? You are sounding like the crazed person."

Ian flung out his arms, breaking the contact. "The only crazed person in this house is Catherine. Her father was right..."

Nick rose, anger seething inside him and growing with each second that passed. "Pray tell, what did her father say?"

"The Vicar said his wife had been cursed with insanity and now Catherine is showing signs. He fears for our safety."

"Augh!" Gregg paced the floor. "I cannot believe I'm hearing this. It's utter nonsense!" He stopped in front of Ian. "*Our safety?* What does the man of God expect her to do? Harm one of us? That dainty woman doesn't have the strength and you well know it."

Nick actually agreed with Gregg ... but the fact still remained, why was Ian so adamant about this?

"The Vicar explained that to me," Ian continued. "When a person has gone mad they have the strength of the devil himself."

"That's horseshit," Gregg shouted.

"Ian." Nick stepped closer. "Why have you suddenly turned against Catherine? Do you have proof she has gone insane?"

Ian frowned. "Not exactly..."

"Then why the accusations?" Gregg accused, pointing a finger in Ian's chest. "Why are you convinced without seeing the evidence for yourself?"

Pushing Gregg away, Ian glared. "Because she's been seen around the people who were injured ... right before they were injured, in fact."

Gregg's arms lifted, his fists ready to fly. Nick stood between his brothers before Gregg let his temper get away from him.

Nick narrowed his gaze on his brother. "Ian, explain yourself."

Ian huffed and marched toward the window, leaning against the frame. "Catherine had been with Father in the carriage when he had his first attack. She was seen at the stables before Gregg's saddle was cut. A few servants saw Catherine speaking to Mary hours before the young maid was beaten." Over his shoulder, he pierced Nick with a stare. "And the Vicar said he saw her near your carriage before you left that night. Some servants witnessed her near Father's room before his last attack."

"Good Lord, Ian. Of course Catherine had been in these places ... she lives here for God's sake." Nick swung around, raking his fingers through his hair. "Besides, what reason would she have to want to harm us?"

A slow chuckle started from Gregg that quickly ballooned to a roaring laugh. Nick arched a brow at his demented

brother. Perhaps Gregg had been consumed with madness instead.

Gregg shook his head. "Ian, I cannot understand why you would think the worst in Catherine just because of this. You should know her better like Nick and I do."

Ian's eyes darkened, and Nick waited for fire to shoot out.

"And I cannot believe you. Either of you," Ian said. "She has batted her eyelashes and hypnotized both my brothers. Why not try using your brain to think instead of the pleasuring instrument between your legs."

In three strides, Nick stood in front of his brother and grasped the lapels of his jacket. He lifted him in the air and pushed him against the wall. "I ought to strangle the very life from you for saying that."

Ian chuckled. "What's wrong, Nick old man? Is the truth so distasteful? Does the nectar from Cat's kisses hide reality from you?"

"Son-of-a—" Nick growled.

The soft tap on the study room door stopped Nick from choking his brother. Later. When they were alone. Then he could pound some sense into him.

Releasing his hold, he took a deep breath to control his anger. He turned toward the door as Gregg hurried to open it.

Standing in the hallway, twisting her hands against her stomach, stood Patsy, Nick's deceased driver's wife. Poor woman. It'd only been a few days since her husband had died in the accident. Nobody had time to mourn for Timothy.

Nick stepped over to the older woman and grasped her hands. "Patsy. How are you faring?"

"I'm ... slowly copin' with my Timmy's tragic departure."

"Once again, you have my sympathy. If ever you need anything, let me know."

"My lord ... um ... I mean Yer Grace. Could I speak with you? Tis most important."

He motioned his hand and she entered the room, keeping her gaze lowered. She continued to wring her hands against her middle, and now he realized she nibbled on her bottom lip.

After he closed the door, she met his gaze. "What is it, Patsy?"

"Timmy..." Her bottom lip trembled, moisture gathering in her eyes.

Gregg stood beside her and patted her back gently. "Go on. What about your husband?"

Her gaze darted from Nick to his brothers, then rested back on him. She licked her lips. "I had to tell ya. This couldn't be put off a moment longer." Her chest rose and fell with her deep breath. "Before my husband died, I think he said the name of the person responsible for the accident."

Nick inhaled sharply. Both Gregg and Ian's gaze snapped to his. His throat suddenly turned dry, so he swallowed. "What name did he say?"

"He said..." A tear slipped from her eye and she wiped it. "He mumbled Miss Martin's name, Yer Grace."

Gregg hissed and raked his fingers through his hair. Ian scrunched his face and glared at Nick. The words didn't sink into Nick's head as quickly. Either that, or he just couldn't believe. He *wouldn't* believe.

Nick shook his head. "You must be mistaken, Patsy. Miss Martin couldn't possibly—"

Ian grabbed his arm and yanked him. "Nick, would you cease this? All you're doing is prolonging the inevitable."

Tightness closed around his throat as pain speared through his chest. He stiffened his body and fisted his hands. "This does not prove a thing," he growled.

Ian faced Patsy. "What else did he say?"

She wiped another stray tear. "Timmy didn't say a lot. He was in and out of consciousness for a few hours before he finally met his maker." She sniffed. "But he kept mumblin' the words *Miss Martin*, and he repeated *accident*. What else could I assume, Yer Grace?"

"Exactly." Ian swung around and crossed his arms over his chest, meeting Nick's gaze through narrowed eyes. "What else could she conclude, *Your Grace*?" He arched his brow. "It's what I've been saying all along, and it's what her father has mentioned. That girl is not in her right mind. She needs to be put away before something else happens."

Confusion pounded in Nick's head and threatened to break his skull. He squeezed his eyes closed. *I need another drink*. There was no way he would believe this nonsense. Foolishness!

Taking a refreshing breath, he looked at Patsy. "Is this all you have for me?"

"Yes, Yer Grace."

He walked her to the door and let her out. After it clicked closed, Gregg and Ian began squawking—shouting—talking about things that didn't register in his brain. He didn't want

the words to. All he could think about was finding Catherine and holding her. Promising her everything would be all right. He wouldn't let Ian's ranting go any further than the study.

The allegations were too ... preposterous. Where they pointing the finger just because she wasn't titled? He didn't think that was the case, yet the hammering in his head wouldn't let him think straight. The pain grew—as did the pain in his chest. He couldn't breathe.

He clamped his hands over his ears, holding the throb from combusting. The voices of his brothers sounded a crescendo. God, would this ever end?

"Cease this insanity," he shouted.

Turning, he peeled his eyes open. Both brothers stared at him with wide expressions. Ian's face was still drawn in a scowl, and Gregg's saddened look tore at his heart. Obviously, Gregg held strong feelings for Catherine also. Perhaps the two of them could put their heads together to discover why the blame had been aimed at her.

Ragged breaths only made his chest ache that much more. He lowered his hands to his sides. "If you two want to argue, do it without me. I'll be retiring to my room. I don't wish any company for the remainder of the evening. Is this understood?"

Gregg nodded. Ian only arched a brow.

He turned and hurried out of the study toward his bedchambers. Agony clenched in his chest, threatening to choke him. Right now all he needed was Catherine.

And nothing would stop him this time.

\* \* \* \*

Catherine snapped alert, pinning her gaze on the opened window in her room. The moon still sat high in the sky. The storm had chased the fog away.

She rubbed her sleepy eyes and lifted to a sitting position. Around her, the room spun and she braced her hands on the mattress. Thickness clouded her head and she gulped in deep breaths to clear her mind.

Running her hands along her bodice, she realized she hadn't changed into her nightgown. Her hands stilled. How did she get in her bed? She didn't remember even retiring.

After the spinning in her head slowed, she scooted to the edge of the bed and slid her feet to the floor. As she stood, the room tilted again, and she swayed, reaching for the bed to steady her.

*What in the devil?* The last time she'd felt this way was the morning she found her mother dead.

Groaning, she massaged her head, hoping to make the memories disappear. She'd only been intoxicated a few times in her life, but this vertigo went beyond consuming too many drinks. It drugged her body to near exhaustion.

She rolled her head on her shoulders, wishing her body didn't ache as if she'd been in bed for days. In fact, a few places felt bruises and beaten. Even her skin chafed.

In the room, a noise broke the silence. Catching her breath, she searched through the shadows dancing in the corners of her chambers, her heart picking up rhythm. Someone sighed. But it wasn't just any sigh. Nick's sigh and his alone had always made her heart flutter.

Sitting in the chair he'd fallen asleep in before rested the man her heart would never stop loving. And just as the last time he'd been there, his head was tilted back, his mouth parted as heavy breaths came out.

On unsteady legs, she weaved her way through the room toward him. Kneeling beside him, she touched his thigh.

"Nick?"

He jumped to a sitting position, his eyes blinking in a fast rhythm. Finally, his attention stopped on her and he smiled. "My darling, Kitty." He stroked her cheek.

She cuddled against his palm. Pain shot through her and she flinched.

He pulled back, his gaze dropping to her cheek. "Good God, woman. What happened?" He swiped his finger across her cheekbone.

Another sting burned her skin. "Ouch." She touched the area that hurt, and her fingers breezed over a lump.

"What happened?" he repeated.

"I ... I don't know."

He circled his arms around her and pulled her up on his lap. "You look as if someone has hit you."

She laughed lightly, confusion swimming in her head. "If they did, I don't remember." She took his hand, brought it up to her mouth and kissed his knuckles. "It's nothing, I assure you." She smiled. "Nick? Why are you here?"

He smiled. "I've missed you and couldn't wait a moment longer to see you." He nodded toward the bed.

"Unfortunately, when I arrived, you were asleep."



The ache in her heart eased. She stroked the side of his face. "I'm happy to see you. And I've also missed you."

"Then show me."

She didn't have to wait for him to tell her what he'd meant, because he pulled her face down to his. Their lips met, and fire shot through her body, igniting passion once again.

Clinging to his shirt, she answered his kisses, slipping her tongue inside to dance with his. Oh, how she'd wanted this. Needed this. Craved too long for it.

"Nick," she sighed, sinking against his body, winding her arms around his neck.

He crushed her to him, but she didn't mind. She'd longed to be this close to him for days now, and anticipated the moment their bodies would be entwined naked on the bed.

His kisses drugged her ... either that or the fuzziness still clogged her head. "Oh, Nick. Am I dreaming?"

With his hands holding her head, he pulled away slightly. Since the shadows wouldn't let her see the color of his eyes, she gazed at his lips. They stretched wider.

"I certainly don't wish that torture on either of us. I hope this is not a dream, for I want nothing more than to hold you, kiss you, and make love to you at this moment."

Groaning, she leaned in for another of his earth-shattering kisses, but a loud commotion echoed through the hall outside her room. Nick's body stilled, as did hers. Within moments, the noise became recognizable. Raised voices floated through the house, sounding panicked.

"What the hell—" Nick lifted her from his lap and stood.

Her body swayed and she grabbed for the back of the chair, praying she would soon gain her strength. Had Nick's kisses sapped what little she had? "What is it?"

"I don't know, but by the sounds coming from below, it doesn't sound good."

He marched to the door and opened it, peeked both ways before hurrying out. She smiled. Still being cautious.

Taking a couple of cleansing breaths, she walked as best she could to the opened door. Voices were louder now, but still high-pitched. On shaky legs, and with a hammering heartbeat, she walked to the staircase. Below stood Nick and his brothers, Lady Gertrude, and two laundry maids. The elderly aunt had her arm around one of the maids. Both maids were crying hysterically.

Nick clasped the hands of one of them. "Please, Sara. I cannot understand you. You must calm yourself."

The maid shook her head, her eyes wide and filled with tears. "Yer Grace ... somethin' terrible has happened."

He nodded. "What has happened?"

Sara wiped her wet cheeks. "It's ... the Vicar. He's been beaten, but we think he's still alive."

Catherine gasped loudly and covered her mouth with her hand. All heads turned up to her.

Ian growled and fisted his hands beside him. "That's enough! Nick, something has to be done about her."

Nick's head swung toward his brother, his cold gaze piercing him. "This is *not* the time, Ian."

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"This is the perfect time." He looked back up at Catherine and pointed at her. "There stands the culprit. She's not in her right mind and it's time to get the authorities involved."

Her breath caught in her throat and her heart ceased beating. Energy drained from her head, going all through her body to her toes. Dizziness filled her mind. As her body fell to the ground, her vision turned black.

## **Nineteen**

Catherine shivered and pulled the wool blanket to her chin. She'd been locked in her room for a whole day now while the authorities determined her guilt.

Closing her eyes, last night's events rushed back to her. They were like a dream ... a nightmare, actually. Instead of being inside her body, it was as if she floated above everything and watched the horror as the Constable rushed into the house and escorted her to her room while a guard stayed at her door.

Gregg had pleaded with the men of the law, trying to convince them of her innocence, but they ignored his request and dragged her to her room.

Too stunned to speak, she had studied everyone's reactions as she climbed the stairs. Ian's expression was one of victory. His smirk and the gleam in his eyes sent chills up her spine.

Wearing a frown, Nick stared at a point off in the distance, his gaze never touching her. Her heart cried out to the man she loved that he would rush to her side and save her, rescue her from this hell. But her pleas went unheard as the brass key ground in the lock, imprisoning her in her room.

Tears stung her eyes. This couldn't be happening. She didn't kill anyone. How could she do all they had accused her of? She couldn't remember.

She pulled her knees up to her chest and buried her face in the folds of her dress. And who had beaten her father? They suspected her, but she couldn't have done it. As a child, she'd

been the one on the receiving end of his brutal hand. Her strength would never compare to his.

A sob broke from her throat and the tears rushed down her face. Her future looked bleak. Nobody could save her now. How could they when she couldn't recall anything? All she remembered about her mother's death was the dizziness that had consumed her when she found the woman lying in a pool of blood. The same dizziness had washed over her last night when she awakened from her nap.

Voices in the hallway brought her head up and made her hold her breath. Straining, she listened closer, but only detected mumbling as the footsteps came closer. As the voices grew, so did the beat of her heart, until they reached her door. She grasped her shaking hands and waited.

The guard opened the door. Sunlight streamed through her room since she'd refused to close the drapes. Squinting at the form filling the doorway, she tried to adjust her vision to the sudden brightness. Then he said her name, and her heartbeat picked up rhythm.

*Gregg.*

She jumped from her bed and ran to him. He opened his arm and she barreled into his chest, crying out relief.

"Oh, Gregg." She sniffed. "I didn't think ... I thought you'd never..." She looked up at him. "I didn't do what they've accused me of. You have to believe me."

His tender smile eased her slightly and he wiped his thumb across her cheek, removing the moisture. "I do believe you. That's why I'm here."

As they walked toward the two-seat sofa, she clung to him, afraid to let go and realize this was all a dream. He sat beside her, still holding her. Across the room, a guard stood by the opened door, arms folded as he watched her through narrowed eyes.

Laying her head against his chest, her sobs diminished and she breathed easier. "Gregg? Is my father all right?"

His hand stroked her hair. "Yes. No broken bones, just a few scratches and bruises."

"Did..." She swallowed hard. "Did he say what happened?"

"No. He's not talking about it."

Her chest clenched and her heart ached. "Does ... does everyone think I did it?"

"Not everyone, love." He kissed her forehead. "Ian does and I cannot fathom why. There's no real proof against you."

She tilted her head back and met his gaze. "What about Nick?"

Gregg shrugged. "Right now, Nick doesn't know which end is up, unless it's coming out of the whiskey bottle. He's locked himself in his room and refuses to speak to anyone."

Her vision blurred with tears. "Do ... do you think he ... believes the awful rumors?"

He wiped the moisture from her cheeks again. "I think he doesn't want to, but he's confused."

"But ... you're here."

He braced his hands on each side of her face. "That's because I love you."

*Doesn't Nick love me, too?* Her body shook with silent cries and she buried her face in Gregg's chest again.

Nick couldn't doubt her innocence. He just couldn't.

"Shh ... I'm here now. No need to fret."

But Gregg didn't understand how much she loved Nick. She wanted Nick to be the one holding her, stroking her hair and calming her fears. The man she loved wasn't here, and her heart twisted in agony.

She gulped in some air. "What's going to happen to me?"

"We will have to wait to see what the police find. Right now they're questioning our servants. I have hired a solicitor—the best in England who will help."

She nodded and wiped her nose with a handkerchief.

"You're a godsend, Gregg."

Using his hands, he tilted her head. When she met his gaze, he smiled. "I'll do anything for you, Cat. I don't want my future wife to be taken to jail."

Her bottom lip trembled. *Future wife*. She hadn't agreed to marry him, so why had he assumed? "Gregg, you shouldn't say such things. You can't predict the future."

"Shh..." He touched his finger to her lips. "I don't want you to think anything but positive thoughts. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Good girl. Now I need to leave, and when I return, I'll have that solicitor I told you about. He wants to ask you questions. Is that all right?"

She nodded. "I'll tell him everything I know. Everything I can remember."

He bent his head and brushed his lips across hers. Although grateful for his assistance, she didn't want to kiss him like that, so she pulled away.

"Thank you, Gregg. You don't know how much this means to me."

He smiled and stood. "Rest assured, I'll not let anything happen to you." He winked, turned and left the room before the guard closed and locked the door.

She inched back to her bed and curled in a fetal position. If fear of the unknown didn't kill her, the empty ache in her chest from losing Nick would.

\* \* \* \*

It had been the worst forty-eight hours of his life ... mostly drinking himself into oblivion because it lessened the pain in his heart. But this morning he awoke with a fresh outlook on life and a new attitude. No more would he stand aside and accept the answers given him since his beloved had been locked in her room. From this day forth, he'd find out the truth no matter who stood in his way.

Right now, that person was Vicar Martin.

For being brutally beaten, the man's wounds recovered sooner than expected. In fact, Nick didn't think the man of God had been hurt that badly. A few scratches marred his face, and only a couple bruises still darkened his cheek and jaw. It surprised Nick that the Reverend hadn't overpowered his attacker, considering the minimal amount of damage that had been done.

The Vicar sat in the parlor sipping tea as he stared out the window. Nick took a deep breath and continued into the room. The older man's head snapped toward him. Slowly, he lowered his cup to the saucer on the table.



"Good morning, Your Grace. I must say you're looking well."

Nick nodded. "And you seem to be healing nicely. Are you up to talking about the accident yet?"

The other man frowned and turned his attention back out the window. "No."

Nick wouldn't accept that answer. Not when the life of the woman he loved hung by a thin rope. He strode to the empty chair across from the man and sat.

"That's regrettable, Vicar Martin, because I've had enough of your secrecy." When the older man met his gaze, Nick arched a brow. "And I'm not leaving until I get the answers I seek."

The Reverend shrugged. "I don't know what you want me to say then."

Leaning his elbows on the table, Nick linked his fingers. "I want the truth. Do you, or do you not know who attacked you?"

The man's jaw hardened. "I know."

"Then why aren't you speaking about it? What are you hiding from the law and from those who want the truth?"

The color in the man's gray eyes grew cold, piercing Nick with a chill.

"Because you will not accept the truth."

Nick pounded his fists on the table, but the other man remained still. "If you're going to tell me it was your daughter, I will tell you it's utter nonsense."

"Then you are a fool, Your Grace."

"I don't believe so."

The Vicar's shoulders straightened. "I know you saw her the other day ... when I was attacked. Did you not notice the bruise on her face also?"

Nick's chest clenched, fear crawling over his skin. "Yes, I noticed. She told me she didn't know how she received it."

"She received it from me. I was trying to ward off her attack."

Nick pushed away from the table and paced the floor, fisting his hands by his side. "I cannot believe such a small woman could attack—and almost kill a man of your intensity." He shook his head. "It's impossible."

"Not when the small woman has the strength of ten men when she's gone mad."

He stopped and faced the Vicar, his breath ragged with frustration. "I've seen her upset before and she's never acted the way you say."

The older man pushed his fingers through his hair and squeezed his eyes closed. "You don't know because you have never seen." He took a breath. "Sophia was insane. Her whole family had been that way. Now the disease has moved to Catherine. She killed Sophia, and now she kills everyone else who'll stand in her way of true happiness." His voice broke.

Nick marched to the table and slapped his hands on the wood, making the Reverend jump, his eyes widening.

"Stop lying!"

Vicar Martin scowled. "I'm not, Your Grace. 'Tis the truth, I swear. I am a man of God. I do *not* lie."

"What reason would she have to kill me?"

"You were leaving and she didn't want you to go. I feel she didn't want to kill anyone, just cause the accident that would bring you back home."

A painful throb began in the base of Nick's skull and worked its way up his head. He rubbed his neck and took a deep breath.

"Reverend, did you see Catherine kill your wife? Did you see her do the actual deed?"

Silence lasted for a few moments. "No, I did not see her kill my beloved, but Catherine had my wife's blood all over her and she was holding the poker from the fireplace."

Nick turned away from the table and resumed his pacing. "And did you see her injure my father in any way?"

"Of course not, Your Grace."

Nick glanced at him and arched a brow. "What about me? Did you see Catherine ever try to hurt me?"

"You know I didn't."

He stopped and faced the older man, folding his arms. "And what about Mary? Why do you think Catherine would want to harm the laundry maid?"

Sighing, the Vicar leaned back in his chair, his body no longer stiff. "I think you know as well as I, Your Grace."

Nick cocked his head. "Humor me."

"The maid was your father's mistress." He scratched his chin. "And Catherine knew it."

"Did she tell you she knew it?"

"No."

"Then how can you be certain she knew this?"

The older man jumped to his feet, knocking the chair over. "Are you calling me a liar?"

"No. I'm searching for facts. I'm trying to find ways to keep your daughter out of jail and away from the hangman's noose." He paused then continued, "So tell me. How did Catherine know about Mary?"

The Reverend huffed. "I don't know. Mary told me Catherine had confronted her about sleeping with your father."

Nick ground his teeth, his hands itching to hit something, too. But he mustn't give up in his search for justice.

"Vicar Martin, do you not find it strange that the only woman who can back up your story is now dead?"

The older man's bushy, graying eyebrows pulled together and his lips tightened. "Why am I the one being asked such preposterous questions? Am I on trial?"

Nick sighed. "No, but I want to find the truth. I must have proof before I believe Catherine is guilty."

"That, Your Grace, will never happen. In fact, I believe it's time for me to take her back to our home. I will make certain she cannot harm another person again."

Narrowing his gaze, Nick shook his head. "You think that taking her away from here will help? I think not!"

"I've already spoken with the police. They think it's a good idea."

"Did you tell them of your suspicions?"

"No, Your Grace. I love my daughter and want to protect her. Leaving Havenwood and returning to our home is the only way. We'll leave tomorrow morning."

Growling, Nick spun around and marched out the door, anger building with each step. Reverend Martin was wrong ... and he must find a way to prove her innocence. Also, he didn't want Catherine that far away. How could he keep watch over the woman he loved if she left?

Perhaps Mrs. Berkley knew something that could help him in his search for justice.

Quickening his step, he surged toward the older woman's room. In the hallway, his butler stopped him.

"Your Grace. Mr. Adam Lewis, your father's solicitor, is here to see you. I've shown him to the study."

Inwardly, he groaned. Now was a bad time to go over his father's estate business and the reading of the will. But he must take care of things as quickly as he could so as to get on with helping Catherine.

"Thank you. Could you please locate Mrs. Berkley and tell her I need to see her posthaste?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

Nick hurried to the study and entered. The balding, portly man sat on a chair, drumming his fingers on the black leather satchel in his lap. When he noticed Nick, he stood. "Good afternoon, Your Grace."

"Thank you, Mr. Lewis. Unfortunately, it's not the best afternoon I've had."

"Problems?"

"Yes. Something has happened that seeks my immediate attention. I hope you don't mind if we reschedule the reading of the will?"

"Of course not. I understand perfectly." He reached into his satchel and withdrew a letter. "But before I leave, I must give you this. I also have one for Miss Martin."

Nick shook his head. "Miss Martin is not receiving visitors right now. May I take her the letter?"

"No, Your Grace. Your father specifically instructed me to hand them only to the recipients." He put forth Nick's letter. "But here is yours."

"Thank you, Mr. Lewis. Once again, I apologize for rescheduling our business. I'll have my secretary contact you for another date."

The man nodded. "As you wish."

After the man left, Nick stared at his father's waxed seal of the family's crest. It hadn't been broken. The contents were for Nick's eyes, and his alone. He should read the letter later, but curiosity got the best of him.

He dropped to the nearest chair and opened the letter.

*"My dearest Nick. I first want to tell you how proud I am of you. Not only have you done what I've asked, but you did it with a light and forgiving soul. You will make an excellent Duke."*

*Nick's heart tightened, but he kept reading.*

*"Now I would like to ask your forgiveness, and I wish you to know I've only done those things any loving and caring father would do to see to the welfare of their son. For a while now, I have led you to believe I brought Catherine to Havenwood because I wanted to marry her. But the truth is ... I wanted you to marry her."*

*A breath caught in his throat. He clutched the paper as his heart hammered out of control.*

*"I've loved Catherine only as a daughter, and I feared the two of you would never find each other. I remember how you teased her relentlessly as a child, and so I thought I'd help you see how special she really is. Catherine's father does not know of this plan, although her mother—my dear departed—Sophia did. We wanted to join our families since we couldn't make it happen all those years ago when we were in love."*

*Tears welled in his eyes, but he kept reading.*

*"Son, I know you're in love with Catherine. Since bringing her to Havenwood, I've seen the way you are when she is near. I've heard the tenderness in your voice when you speak to her, and I feel the heat sparking between the two of you. Please forgive a meddling father who only wanted the best for his son. I sincerely pray both you and Catherine can learn to forgive me and go on with your lives ... as husband and wife."*

*Nick stared at the letter, his vision blurred from the liquid in his eyes. All this time she had been his for the taking and because he thought she was his father's, guilt had made a permanent mark on his conscience. He gritted his teeth until his jaw ached. How dare his father keep this kind of information from him? How could his father let him agonize over loving Catherine for so long?*

*A light tap on the door shook him from his seething thoughts. He glanced at the door. "Enter," he snapped.*

*His butler entered just inside the room. "Your Grace, I have tried to locate Mrs. Berkley, but it appears the woman has disappeared."*

Nick scrunched his forehead. "Why? What's happened now?"

"Her clothing and personal items are still in her room, but the staff haven't seen her at all today. In fact, they haven't seen her since last evening."

Releasing a gush of air, Nick raked his fingers through his hair. What in the hell was happening around here? His chest clenched. He needed to gain control not only of his emotions but his estate before everyone ended up dead.



## **Twenty**

Nick pulled his weary body out of bed and slugged to the bathing chamber. He'd stayed up to the wee hours of the morning trying to locate Mrs. Berkley. Nobody knew anything.

He scrubbed his hands over his face before splashing it with cold water. Today he needed to see Catherine before her father took her home. He had to tell her he loved her, and to assure her he'd find the true killer. And to ask her to become his wife. Probably not in that order either, and probably on his knees begging her forgiveness the whole time.

He loved her more than life itself, and if he lost her now, he was as good as dead, for his heart would never function again.

An hour later and after two cups of coffee, he walked out of his room dressed and ready for the day. Each step closer to Catherine's room, his heart picked up rhythm and beat a little faster. He had to stop letting so much time pass between the moments he saw Catherine. His nerves couldn't take the strain.

He rehearsed what he'd say to her in his mind. He'd take her in his arms, kiss her endlessly, and tell her he loved her and couldn't live without her. As always, she would melt against him. She'd forgive him and they could live happily ever after.

The guard sat on a chair in front of her room, then stood as Nick grew closer. Before he said anything to the man, Gregg stepped out of her room, adjusting his cravat. When

his brother's gaze met his, he stopped. The smile that had been on Gregg's mouth disappeared.

"Nick, old man. What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to see Catherine, of course."

Gregg shook his head. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but she doesn't want to see you."

Pain shot through his heart and he clenched his hands.

"And why is that, may I ask?"

"Because, my dear brother, you abandoned her at her time of need. You did nothing when everyone pointed the accusing finger. To her, that was the worst thing you could have done."

The pain twisted deeper, and his stomach lurched. "I was in shock—just as we all were, Gregg. I didn't know what to think, what to do."

Gregg folded his arms. "But she doesn't see it that way. You are dead to her now, as is Ian. I'm the only person she wants to see."

Taking in a deep breath, he raked his fingers through his hair. Tears stung his eyes and he blinked to keep the liquid back. The ache in his chest deepened. "Gregg, I need to talk to her. I need to tell her that I haven't given up on her and that I'm looking for the killer."

"I'll be certain to pass that information along."

Nick gritted his teeth and narrowed his gaze. "Gregg, I *demand* you let me in that room."

The guard stepped closer, folding his arms over his beefy chest. Gregg shrugged. "Demand all you like, but she doesn't want to see you. Besides," he said smoothing out his vest, "I

won't let you be upsetting my future wife. She's in enough turmoil as it is."

Nick gasped. "*Future wife?* When in the hell did this happen?"

"Just last evening. Catherine needs a man who'll stay by her side no matter what." He stepped closer to Nick. "And I'm that man. I have *never* doubted her for one moment."

A bullet through the heart wouldn't have hurt as much as his brother's words ... or the realization that he might have truly lost Catherine this time.

But did he blame her? After all, Nick had a moment of doubt the other night. Instead, he should have been at her side, fighting the Constable and Ian. But he hadn't. His feet had stayed rooted to the floor, his mind an empty void.

Anger boiled behind Nick's eyelids and he squeezed them shut. Fighting for control, he breathed deeply and opened his eyes. "Then I suppose congratulations are in order. Please tell Catherine I hope the best for her ... and for you, of course. Also let her know I will not give up searching for the killer. I won't stop until the culprit is found."

He turned on his heels and walked away, trying not to step on his broken heart in the process.

\* \* \* \*

They would be leaving within the hour.

Catherine's heart clenched. And she wouldn't be able to say her farewells to Nick. Of course, he didn't love her enough to believe in her innocence, so why should she tell him goodbye?

She glanced over every item in her room ... the room that would no longer be hers. A heavy pressure gathered in her chest. The past several months had been hell for her. Yet at times, it had been heaven. She'd made glorious love to Nick on that bed. They'd touched, caressed, and kissed several times right here in this room.

Running her fingers along her vanity, she exhaled deeply. She'd come to think this was all hers ... or would be some day. Now, that too, was just a memory.

On the corner of her vanity, a letter caught her eyes. Grant's solicitor had given this to her last night. He said Grant had written it. Dare she open it to see what he wanted to tell her after his death?

Her mind had been deviated once he'd started asking her questions about the murders ... and her whereabouts during those times. She couldn't help him much. She didn't remember.

Pain had sliced through her head as she tried to recall where she'd been those times. The more questions he'd asked, the more his tone had turned harsh.

Her throat tightened with emotion, and she willed the tears not to come, but her eyes watered nonetheless. By the way he'd talked, her future had seemed bleak. She didn't think he believed her either. But thankfully, the Constable had no solid proof, and so he could not take her to jail.

She had remembered a little about the night her father had been attacked. She'd gone to his room to confess her wrongdoings in hopes he'd let her stay so she and Nick could

marry, but didn't find him. The next thing she recalled was awaking in her bed, dressed and dizzy with bewilderment.

A throb began in her temple and she rubbed the growing pain. Her gaze fell to Grant's letter again. No better time than now. Her father—and the guard—would be here any moment to escort her to the carriage that would take her home.

Taking great care, she broke the seal.

"My dearest Catherine. The days until I leave this world are numbered, and I feel I need to be truthful with you before meeting my maker. I have not been fully honest with you. I brought you to Havenwood under a false pretense. Although I led you to believe I wanted to marry you, I had no plans of doing that. Instead, I brought you here hoping you and Nick would fall in love."

She hitched a breath and placed her hand to her hammering heartbeat.

"You already know how much I loved your mother. When I was younger, I did not follow my heart. My parents pounded into my head that it was my duty to marry a woman of nobility. Because of this, I've realized what I had lost. I do not want Nick to make the same mistakes. I've known he's been in love with you since childhood, but society has dictated to him that he marry someone with an abundance of wealth. Nick has always been an obedient boy, and I feared he would follow society's expectations. That is the very reason I brought you here."

She swiped the tear rolling down her cheek and continued.

"I have written Nick a letter explaining my deception. I sincerely pray the two of you will forgive me and follow your

hearts. Forget what the members of the ton think, and go with your feelings. Please forgive me for any misconduct that I may have shown toward you. I'm aware my illness makes me think things I know are not right. Rest assured your father didn't know what I had planned, but I confess your mother did. Catherine, I will always love you ... as Sophia's daughter."

Closing her eyes, the tears gushed down her face as she held in the sobs she wanted to release. This had been Grant's plan all along? Why had he put her through so much heartache? Why couldn't he see she was indeed in love with Nick, as he was with her?

But now it was too late. Nick's love wasn't strong enough to fight the accusations thrown at her the past couple of days. For that, she may never forgive him.

A knock came upon the door, and she jumped, clutching the letter to her chest. "Who is it?"

"It's your father. Are you ready to leave?"

She scrambled to her reticule lying on the bed and stuffed the letter inside. "In a moment, Father." Using the back of her hand, she wiped away the tears then patted her face and pinched her cheeks.

Holding her chin erect, she walked to the door and pulled it open. Her father wouldn't meet her eyes. Her heart twisted. So similar to the way he'd acted right after her mother was killed.

Beside him, the guard stood, his gaze bearing down on her.

She tried to keep an outward serenity about her as she walked down the wide staircase toward the waiting carriage. Her luggage had been packed in the accompanying conveyance, which would make their departure quicker.

Gregg waited beside the carriage and gave her a hug and kiss on the cheek before she climbed in, her father entering afterward. As the wheels crunched on the road, she kept her eyes on Gregg, his image shrinking with each second.

Nick had not come to see her off. She glanced at the windows of the manor, but couldn't detect a shadow anywhere. Her heart sank lower.

A few months ago, she'd thought her life would be a dungeon, but it was nothing compared to the misery promised for her as she lived her life without Nick.

\* \* \* \*

Nick had enough of waiting. His patience couldn't handle it. He must find the person trying to frame Catherine.

He'd watched his servants closely when the Constable asked questions. So far, none had given any leeway to being fraudulent. They all seemed honest.

Then there was Anne. Her and Sarah, the other laundry maid, were the two who'd first happened on the vicar after his beating ... and who had found Mary. Today Anne acted differently.

While they were questioned, Anne's wide eyes made Nick pause. Sarah talked mostly, Anne only nodded on occasion. But it was the ashen color of Anne's skin, the shakiness of her hands, and her gaze that couldn't stay on anyone which made

him suspicious. Anne had always been a shy girl. If she knew something, she for certain wouldn't tell the Constable.

He breathed a sigh of relief once the Constable left. After waiting a little while, he hurried downstairs to the laundry room. Anne was not there.

"Sarah? Do you know where Anne is?"

The maid shook her head. "She wasn't feeling well, Your Grace, so she went for a walk."

"Do you know where?"

"No, but she usually goes toward the pond."

He thanked her and hurried out of the house and to the stable. After he had his horse saddled, Nick rode hard to the place Sarah had indicated. When he approached, a figure of a woman stood near a tree as she faced the body of water.

It wasn't until he was almost upon her when she spun around. A glare reflected off the knife she held, and he squinted against the shine. When he finally rested his gaze on her, she held the knife to her chest. Her face paled.

"Don't come any closer." Her voice shook.

Cursing under his breath, he brought the animal to a halt. What was she about? The knot in his stomach warned him it wasn't good.

"Anne? What are you doing?"

Slowly, he dismounted, and she backed up a few steps toward the tree.

"I mean it, Yer Grace." She clutched the knife tighter, positioning the point right above her heart.

He held up his hands. "Anne, I'm not here to hurt you. Please, put the knife down so we can talk."



Tears fell from her eyes and she shook her head. "There's no use in talkin'. Not anymore."

Her hands trembled, as did his own, which he hid behind him and clasped together. "Please, Anne. You don't need to hurt yourself." He took a deep breath to try and calm his out of control heartbeat. "Do you know why I'm here?"

"Yes." She sniffed. "I knew it was only a matter of time before ye searched me out."

"Why?"

"Because I know ... I know more than what I told the Constable."

"Will you tell me?"

She shook her head. Her hair had fallen out of the bun and the awkward bundle rested on her shoulder. "He will torture me, just as he tortured Mary."

He sucked in a quick breath. She was talking about the killer. "Anne, he won't hurt you. I won't allow it."

"Ye cannot stop him, Yer Grace. He knows everythin'. He has eyes everywhere."

Taking another step forward, he held his hands out away from his body as to show her he was no threat. "Tell me who he is and I'll make certain he's put away. The constable is looking for him."

Tears blurred her eyes. "No, he's not. He's lookin' for poor Miss Martin."

"Exactly," he related slow and calm, "which is why we need to tell the Constable who this man is so he can be arrested."

Again, she shook her head. "Nay. Ye cannot make me say. He will torture me. He frightened Mrs. Berkley away, too. I don't have anyplace to hide like she does."

He furrowed his brow. "Mrs. Berkley knows also?"

"Aye."

"And that's why she's not here?"

"She's at her sister's house in London."

He nodded, recalling that was where his father had first heard of the lady's companion. Mrs. Berkley's sister had married an Earl. Now he had to remember the woman's name.

He licked his parched lips. "Please, Anne. You have to help me. Miss Martin wouldn't harm anyone, and if we don't find this man, she'll be hung for a crime she didn't commit." A knot tightened in his throat. "Please help me. I ... I ... love her. I cannot let her go to jail."

Her sobs had stopped, but she still held the knife above her heart. She glanced down at the object, her bottom lip quivering.

"What if he finds me?" she asked softly.

"If you tell me who he is, I'll help you. I'll keep you safe. I promise."

Slowly, she lowered the knife. When her arms reached her sides, she crumbled to the ground and covered her face with her hands. He rushed to her and took her in his arms, comforting her.

"It's all right now, Anne. He won't get you."

She shook her head. "He tortured Mary. He wouldn't let her live to tell anyone her secret."

"What secret is that?" He stroked her head.

"She was pregnant."

He raised his eyebrows. His father wouldn't have been able to do that ... would he? "Did she know who the father was?"

"Aye."

"Who?"

"The ... the Vicar."

Shock hit him like a bucket of cold water. "Indeed?"

"Aye." She sniffed. "But he wouldn't let her live to tell."

He pulled back and stared into her tear-streaked face.

"*Who* wouldn't let her live? The father of her child ... or the one who killed her?"

She wiped her nose with the back of her hand and sleeve.

"The one who killed her *is* the father of the child."

He gasped and swayed, his mind reeling from the shock.

"No ... no..."

"Aye, Yer Grace. The Vicar. He tortured Mary before he killed her. He would have tortured Mrs. Berkley, but she fled. If he hears I talked to ye, he'll torture me, too."

Panic gripped his chest, squeezing the breath out of him. Catherine was in danger. The vicar had struck his daughter the other night—the bruise had rose on her cheek in a hideous fashion. Yet Catherine couldn't remember. Why? She wouldn't have been trying to protect her father. He shook his head. That wouldn't be like her. She would have told him. So why couldn't she remember?

Anne gripped his arm tighter. "Do ye swear to God ye won't let him touch me?"

Always, My Love  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

He nodded. "You will be protected. Let's get you back home. Right now, it's Miss Martin I'm fearful for. She and her father returned home this morning."

She blinked, then widened her eyes. "They did?"

"Yes."

"Ye must go save her. She's in grave danger."

His heart twisted in agony. "Then let's depart. I don't want to waste another moment."

## **Twenty-one**

Nick ran into the house. "Gregg!" He rushed into his father's study and to the weapons cabinet and threw open the glass doors.

Quick footsteps boomed through the hall. "Nick? Is that you?"

"I'm in here." He grabbed a pistol and peered up the barrel to make certain it was on target.

The echo from boots grew closer, and soon the deep breaths of his brother rasped behind him. "What in the devil?"

Nick glanced over his shoulder. "It's the vicar. He's the murderer."

Gregg scrunched his nose. "Are you insane? Why would you come to that conclusion?"

Another pair of boots clunked on the floor and entered the study. Ian's eyes widened. "What's the matter? I detected panic in your voice."

Nick arched a brow. "Why would you care? You don't believe in Catherine's innocence."

Ian folded his arms. "So that's what this is about?"

"Yes. Catherine did not kill Mary or beat her father."

"Can you prove it?"

"Yes." Nick shoved the pistol in his pocket and grabbed a saber, hooking the belt around his waist. "Mrs. Berkley and Anne can testify the vicar killed Mary."

Gregg swore and ran his fingers through his hair. Ian cocked his head before a laugh escaped his throat.

"The vicar? What kind of stories are they telling? And what an idiot you are for believing."

He grabbed Ian's shirt and gave him a hard shake. "Catherine is in trouble. Her father's a mad man, and I'm going to save her. If you dare try to stop me, I swear on Father's grave, I'll kill you myself."

Nick's chest heaved with quick breaths as he stared into his brother's doubting eyes.

Ian's harsh gaze soon softened and he nodded. "You love her that much?"

"I'd give my life to save hers."

"Are you certain it's her father?"

Nick released his hold on Ian. "If you had spoken to Anne as I just did, you would have seen the terror in her eyes. She was ready to kill herself for fear the vicar would find out what she knew and torture her as he had Mary."

Gregg cursed again. "Then what are we standing around for? Let's go save Catherine."

Nick patted Gregg's shoulder. "Thank you."

His brother pushed past him and grabbed his own pistol. Nick hurried out to his horse with Gregg not too far behind. As he swung his leg over the back of the animal, he prayed he'd make it to Catherine's cottage in time. He couldn't let her brutal father touch her again.

He glanced over his shoulder at Gregg. "Are you with me then?"

Sadness touched his brother's eyes, his mouth tugged in a frown. "Do you love her enough to do the proper thing and marry her?"

Nick gave a sharp inhale. "You knew?"

"Yes."

He scratched his chin and nodded. "I love her, Gregg, but I won't marry her just to do the right thing. I want to marry her because I adore her. I have since childhood."

Gregg's lips thinned. His Adam's apple bobbed. "Then let's go rescue her so you can give her the happiness she deserves."

"Are you with me to the end?" Tears stung Nick's eyes.

Gregg gave him a slight grin. "To the end."

\* \* \* \*

Catherine curled on the bed and pulled her knees to her chest, burying her face in her skirt. This is where she'd gone soon after she and her father had arrived at home two days ago. This was where she would stay. For how long, she didn't know.

She couldn't go on living with a broken heart.

Tears streaked down her cheeks and fatigue had sapped the strength out of her. All she could do was lie and stare at the wall.

Why couldn't she remember? Why was she having blackouts? It couldn't possibly be the reason her father had given. Her mother wasn't insane, or she would have realized it. She definitely couldn't have that disease or Nick would have seen it.

The harder she tried to remember what she'd done that night her father had been beaten, the harder her head pounded. But she couldn't give up.

Sleep threatened to disrupt her thoughts, and soon she floated toward her dreams. Memories came little by little. She'd been upset when she'd left her room that evening. She would do anything not to return home with her father. Anything. Even confess that she had slept with Nick. Then he for certain would let her stay. In fact, he'd even insist Nick marry her and do the right thing.

She had gone to his room first, but he wasn't there. In desperation, she searched through the house then wandered outside. The fog had moved in, but thankfully, it wasn't thick. Still, she hurried around the estate on foot, hoping to get a glimpse of her father. When she neared the stables, a movement near the large hedges drew her attention.

The figure of a man stumbled out into the clearing. At first she thought it was someone who'd had too many spirits. His clothes were wrinkled and dusty, his hair disheveled. Yet the closer she studied him, she'd realized it was her father because of the black clergy robe he wore.

When he saw her, he froze. She remained still, wondering why he acted like a frightened rabbit who'd been caught by a hungry wolf. Within moments, he straightened and stalked toward her, no longer appearing drunk at all.

The memory faded and Catherine's head pounded harder. She moaned and rolled to her side on the bed, determined to remember more.

The haze in her mind lifted again, and she recalled her father's stern expression.

"Daughter? Why are you about this time of night, and without a proper escort?"



Fear had turned her throat dry, so she swallowed. "I've been looking for you."

He grabbed her arm in a tight hold and she whimpered.

"Do you realize what kind of woman that makes you, out here by yourself? Why, you're nothing but a jezebel."

Struggling, she shook her head. "No, you have it wrong. I came to look for you."

Laughter rattled deep in his chest. "I think it's one of your made-up stories again. In fact, I'm certain you were probably looking for Nicholas. His father is dead, and now you think you can sink your whore claws into him."

Tears stung her eyes. "No, you have it all wrong." She tugged on her arm, but he continued to hold it in a vise-like grip. "Father, we must talk."

Although her father's eyes were on her, it was as if he looked right through to the tress in back of her.

He lifted his chin, giving her his all-powerful scowl. "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord; though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow, though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

Catherine shook her head. What was he doing quoting scriptures at a time like this? "Father?"

"You are a sinner, my daughter. You must ask the Lord's forgiveness." Yanking her with him, he fell to his knees and she stumbled beside him. "Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine; the soul that sinneth, it shall die."

His hand tightened and she cried out. "Let me go. You are mad."

"But if the wicked shall turn from all his sins that he hath committed, and keep all my statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die."

A lump welled in her throat. He talked nonsense, yet by the wicked gleam in his eyes, he believed every word coming from his mouth. Did he think he was God?

Her mind scrambled to remember those scriptures that he forced her to memorize as a child. If this was his only form of communicating, then she'd play his game. "The next day," she began in a shaky voice, "John seeth Jesus coming up to him and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world."

Her father's eyes narrowed, his lips curled. "Then said Jesus unto them, I go my way, and ye shall seek me, and shall die in your sins; whither I go, you cannot come."

Fear crawled over her, piercing its fangs deep into her skin, just as his fingers were doing. "So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone."

He gripped her shoulders and shook her hard. "Fools make a mock of sin, but among the righteous, there is favor."

Tears streamed down her face. "And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man or his parents..."

The man she remembered from childhood yelled and raised his hand then brought his palm down across her face. Her head snapped back and she fell to the ground. Pain ripped through her neck and shoulders.

"The father shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers; every man shall be put to death for his own sin."

He raised his hand again and she squeezed her eyes closed, preparing for that final blow. Pain exploded on her cheek and she cried out.

The harsh memory shook through her body and she bolted up in bed. Breathing heavy, moisture ran from her face and down her neck—a mixture between tears and sweat. She'd finally remembered what happened ... and now knew why she'd chosen to forget.

She didn't beat her father. He'd beaten her!

Gingerly, she ran her fingers over the lump still on her cheek and flinched. Sobs wracked her weak body and more tears sprang forth. Could she make the authorities see she had not committed a crime?

Shaking, she scooted to the end of the bed. She must leave here. Soon. Tonight. If her father knew she remembered, he'd kill her for certain.

As she sank her feet into the rug, she glanced at the bedstand. A cup of broth sat there, the heavenly aroma tickled her senses and made her stomach growl. It had been a while since she'd eaten last. Maybe even before she left Havenwood.

With an unsteady hand, she brought the broth to her mouth and sipped. The heated liquid trickled down her throat and into her empty stomach, making her want more. She gulped the rest and set the empty cup back on its saucer.

Her limbs trembled and she cursed herself for not eating these past few days to keep up her strength. How could she escape her murderous father this weak?

But she had to escape. She had to get back to Nick and tell him what she remembered. She would tell Mr. Lewis and he would help her.

She stood and the room tilted. Bracing her hands on the nightstand, she closed her eyes and breathed deep. Perhaps this was the punishment she received for lying in bed for so long.

Slowly, she straightened and walked forward. With each step toward the door, she gained control of her weakened body. Soon, she'd be downstairs and finding something to eat. In order to leave this hell, she needed to get food in her body fast. But now she must pack a few things. Not much. Since she planned on traveling by horse, there were only a few things she could bring.

She found her warmest cloak and slipped on her boots. She rolled a blanket as tight as she could to take with her.

The cottage remained quiet as she tiptoed to the kitchen. She found bread, cheese and apples. This would do for now.

Eating like a starved person, she chomped the apple as fast as she could and in between bites stuffed pieces of bread in her mouth. Slowly, her strength returned, but dizziness still threatened to topple her over. She'd just have to take small steps on her way to the stable to saddle her horse.

With each step she listened for her father's voice, took deep breaths to smell his leathery scent if he were nearby,

and kept her gaze alert. The evening wind whipped her hair around her face, and she pushed the fly-away lock aside.

Her heartbeat grew the nearer she came to the stable. Shadows appeared around every section surrounding the structure—the trees, bushes, and sides of the building. She wiped her sweaty palms on her dress then grasped her shaky hands together. Taking deep breaths, she tried to regulate her ragged breathing.

*Almost there.*

Inside the stable, the horses moved, their hooves knocking against the wooden walls as they snorted and neighed. The hammer of her heartbeat slowly drowned out all other sounds.

She hurried to her sidesaddle, lifted it and brought it to her horse. Using a shaky voice, she cooed gentle words to the animal, while fumbling with the straps as she adjusted everything into place.

A shuffle whispered behind her and she swung around. Into the shadows she peered, waiting for the one person she feared more than life itself to make himself known. But the longer she stared, the more she realized the wind had been playing tricks on her. Perhaps her father wasn't here after all.

Slowly, she turned to the horse and finished fastening the buckles. The mare nudged her shoulder with his nose.

She petted his neck. "It's all right, Meadowlark. We'll be gone in no time."

Pausing in mid stroke, she bit her bottom lip. Where would she go? She didn't know her way to Havenwood. And if she did, it would take her a day and a half to get there. Perhaps

she should ride to the nearest town and find somebody who would take pity on her. From there she could send a letter to Havenwood.

She released a deep breath. Would Nick even care? Gregg would ... and Gregg would certainly save her from her father.

With that in mind, she grasped the reins and led the horse out of the stable. From down the hill a sound jarred her from her thoughts and she stopped. A woman's whimper had drifted on the wind.

Her heart lodged in her throat, turning it dry. No other woman lived on her property. Who could it be? And was it indeed a woman's cry, or some trapped animal?

Dismissing it from her head, she continued in her pursuit, but the weep came again, but louder. She squeezed her eyes closed and leaned her forehead against the horse's neck.

She had to be hearing things. There couldn't be a woman sobbing down the slope toward the stream. Yet, if someone was hurt, she had to help.

Opening her eyes, she swung away from the horse. Dizziness washed over her, making the world tilt. She clung to the animal before toppling over. Lord, what was wrong with her? Hadn't she eaten enough to gain her strength—at least a portion of it?

Yet with each step toward the voice crying for help, the fog in her head thickened. No! She mustn't give into the darkness creeping upon her.

She made her way past a group of trees, down a hill-bank, toward the stream. The muffling grew louder and

lightheadedness reached throughout her body, threatening to succumb to the murkiness in her head.

The loud whap of a strap hitting something solid rang through the air, and the crying increased. Her chest tightened. She hurried toward the sound, stumbling on her way.

As she reached the clearing, the tall figure of her father stood with his back toward her. In his hand a whip, and on the ground ... *Oh, Lord!* A woman.

Shadows danced around her, hiding her true identity. Would Catherine even know who it was in the light of day? Welts had risen high on the tortured woman's face. Ropes tied her hands behind her and were fastened to her ankles.

Catherine gasped and quickly covered her mouth.

Too late.

Her father swung around and faced her, his hand lifted to strike. She cringed and squeezed her eyes closed, but he did not deliver the blow.

Peeking through slit eyelids, he stood still. Blood rushed throughout her body in a race. A throb beat through her head, and her heartbeat knocked against her ribs, threatening to break them.

Her father lowered the whip and brought it behind his back. His jaw hardened as his gaze pierced through her.

"Daughter? Why are you about this late in the evening?"

She blinked, hoping her blurred vision would clear.

"Father? Is that all you have to say?"

He shrugged. "You think I should say more?"

"What about ... her?" She nodded toward the woman on the ground.

He glanced at the figure. "What about her?"

"What are you doing?"

"I'm punishing her, if you must know. She disobeyed the Lord, and so she must pay for her sins."

"But ... but..." Tears stung her eyes. "But it's not up to you to punish her. That's between her and the Lord."

The beaten woman lifted her wobbly head and looked at her. "Cath—rine," she rasped.

Catherine sucked in a breath. "Mrs. Berkley?" Tears filled her eyes and she looked back at her father. "My God, what have you done?"

She moved toward her companion to give some aide, but her father stepped in her path.

"Leave us," he commanded. "You should not watch the way I handle my rebellious followers."

Rubbing her throbbing temple, she shook her head. "Father, you are insane."

He let out a growl mere seconds before the back of his hand connected with her face. She reeled backward and fell to the earth. Pain shot through her, not only in her cheek, but also through every bone in her body. The dizziness in her head thickened moment by moment.

She lifted her heavy eyelids and glared at her father. "What has Mrs. Berkley ever done to you? For that matter, what did Mary ever do to you?"

His gaze widened. "Mary?"

"Yes, Father. I know you killed her. But why?"



His attention narrowed, his mouth pinched in a scowl.  
"Grant does *not* deserve happiness."

She gasped. "But ... Grant is dead."

He nodded. "The good Lord directed my hands when I loosened the wheel on Nick's coach. I knew Grant's tired heart would give out once his beloved son was dead."

"No!" She sobbed, covering her mouth.

"Grant didn't deserve love. He took it from me, so I took it from him, and you see, my dear, I had bedded with Mary, too. A fitting irony, don't you think?"

She tried blinking away the tears, but they still filled her eyes and ran down her face. "Why?" Her voice shook.

He reached down and gripped her arm. "He stole your mother's love from me and the two of them committed adultery behind my back." He gave her a hard shake. "That's why I had to kill her, too. I wanted everyone to think it was you, though, so I could continue doing the Lord's work. I even laced your drink tonight with a sleeping draught ... but it didn't seem to have worked."

"No..." She sniffed, her heart breaking more. "How could you do such a thing? I loved you. Mother and I—I—loved you."

"She coupled with Satan himself." He stood, yanking her to her feet. "Which is why you must die also. You have coupled with Satan's son, and you may be carrying his child. For that, you will be punished."

*Lord no!* She struggled to free her arm, but her body continued to weaken as a hazy fog filled her head. She would certainly die by her father's hand. Hopefully, it would be painless ... and go quickly.

He dragged her to the stream and pushed her in. She fell to her hands and knees, the water only coming up to her elbows. The cold water brought her more alert than she'd been a moment ago, but it didn't make the dizziness disappear.

As her head swam in confusion, her father's voice echoed through the night, repeating scripture after scripture. She didn't have the strength to counter him this time. Nor did she have the strength to fight, but she must. Yet her damp clothes threatened to drag her further into the water and take her under. Small waves thrashed against her body and she swayed.

He stepped closer and raised his arm, the black whip flashing through the night like hell's spirit. She closed her eyes, praying death would come soon and save her from this agony.

His voice grew louder. The moment of pain would soon be upon her. But over the wind in the distance came another sound. Men's voices lifted in anger. Then the pop of a pistol as it fired.

Mrs. Berkley screamed.

Catherine opened her eyes. Her father had stopped quoting the Bible. With his stare fixed on her, he staggered forward. The hand holding the whip sagged to his side. Color washed from his face. Blood oozed from his chest.

Before he reached the water, he glanced over his shoulder. She followed his gaze. Shadows through the trees crawled toward her at a remarkable speed. Tall. Large like men. Two of them. Their voices still shouting.

Always, My Love  
*by Phyllis Campbell*

*Nick?*

Her heavy eyelids closed again, and she couldn't fight the blackness taking over her mind.

## Epilogue

Nick cradled Catherine's small hand in his, stroking her soft skin with his thumb. Love burst in his chest. His bride faced him and gazed into his eyes. The smile stretched from ear-to-ear probably matched the one he wore.

*"I now pronounce you husband and wife."*

Her smile grew, and his mouth ached from holding his grin for so long.

Upon the preacher's instructions, he leaned forward and kissed his wife. She threw her arms around him and hugged him tight. Behind them, applause broke out along with shouts and whistles.

Laughing, he pulled away. She, too, chuckled with him while twin spots of pink colored her cheeks.

"I love you," he mouthed.

"I love you, too," she repeated.

He couldn't believe he'd actually made it to this point. Several weeks ago, he'd thought all hope was gone. At that time, it had been.

He brushed his fingers across her chin, briefly caressing her lips with his thumb. She cuddled against his hand.

And to think he'd almost lost her. If he and Gregg had reached her a half-hour later that night, the vicar would have whipped her to death.

Thankfully, it only took one bullet from his pistol to bring the so-called man of God down. The Reverend would never touch his daughter again. The good Lord would have to deal with the madman now—and rightly so.

Wedding guests bearing down upon him and his wife pulled him from his thoughts, and he turned to greet them. Mrs. Berkley appeared much better today. Her injuries were healing nicely. A few bruises still marred her face and neck and hands, but they weren't as noticeable as they'd been six weeks ago.

Gregg gave him a hug, then stepped to Catherine. The smile on his brother's face wavered; his love for Catherine and loss were obvious. She hugged him and kissed his cheek. Nick patted his brother's shoulder and squeezed.

Gregg pointed his head in Catherine's direction. "You'd better take good care of her, or I'll be tempted to teach you a lesson in manners."

Nick tilted his head back and laughed. He gave his brother a wink. "Oh, Gregg. You can bet I'll cherish her. I've been through too much to lose her now."

When Gregg moved past, Ian stepped up. No enthusiastic smile graced his face, and yet it wasn't pulled into a scowl like it'd been a while back. In fact, Nick would have guessed by Ian's droopy eyes and lips that sadness was the emotion building inside his brother.

Catherine's gaze dropped to the floor of the church and she scooted closer to Nick's side. He slid his arm around her in a secure grip.

"Ian." He nodded.

The longer Ian stared at Nick, water pooled in his brother's eyes. He blinked and looked away, but soon returned his attention. Ian's Adam's apple bobbed.

"Nick ... Catherine," Ian began, then cleared his throat.

Catherine looked at him. "Yes, Ian?"

"I ... I ... um ... I would like to apologize. It's hard for me to admit I'm wrong, and I'm so very broken to think my stubbornness might have caused your death." Ian touched her hand. "Will you ever forgive me for distrusting you?"

"Yes." Catherine's voice squeaked.

Nick clapped his hand on his brother's shoulder. "You forget, Brother, this wonderful woman forgave me when I showed a moment of doubt." He glanced at his bride and gave her a wink, then looked back at Ian. "She has a huge heart, and that's why I love her so much."

Her arm tightened around his waist and she smiled up at him.

Ian wiped a stray tear falling from his eye and nodded. "I can see why you love her, Nick. She is indeed a forgiving woman."

She pulled away and hugged Ian. He kissed her cheek.

After a little while, the guests wandered out of the church, leaving him alone with his bride. Beautiful as an angel, her hair had been swept up in a fancy styled bun while tendrils brushed near her ears and across her forehead. The ice-blue, silk dress she wore hugged her bosom and bared her shoulders and made her violet eyes stand out more. Absolutely the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

He gathered her in his arms until her chest touched his. Fire sparked in his trousers, desire running rapid through his body, reminding him that tonight would be their wedding night.

"Well, we made it."

She smiled. "Yes we did."

"You know, the *ton* will look down on us for creating such a scandal. We really should have waited until the full year of mourning before we married."

A chuckle sprang from her throat. "Do you regret your decision?"

"Not me. I'm used to scandal. Runs in the blood. My father was wild in his younger days, too."

She caressed his chin. "I'm not surprised."

He turned his face just enough to kiss her hand. "But what of you? Will you love me through it all?"

"But of course, my love." She lifted her mouth to his and brushed her lips across his briefly. "Especially because we will create a greater scandal in the months ahead."

He arched a brow. "How do you figure?"

Her cheeks darkened again. "You see, my love," she said, lowering her voice, "we will be adding to our family in less than eight months. If Lady Ruthaford is counting, she'll realize I conceived before we were married."

Happiness burst in his chest. He laughed and picked her up, swinging her around. She joined him, and their musical voices rang throughout the empty church, nearly matching the bells ringing from the steeple.

"You have made me one satisfied man, my dear. Hopefully, I can please you until we're old and gray."

She tilted her head to the side, her eyes softening. "Always, my love."

### About Phyllis Campbell

**Phyllis Campbell does what she loves best—writing love stories. Since she wrote her first play at the age of seventeen, she's devoted her life to finding that 'happy ending'. She's been an avid reader of romance since her marriage in 1985, and she still can't get enough of a great story. She's continued her love for performing by writing six more plays for her community. Now she's excited about expanding her stories into novels. Phyllis is a member of several romance writers groups, including Romance Writers of American, and online critique groups.**

*Watch for Phyllis' next release, Ten Ways To Melt A Man's Heart, coming April 2006.*

*Whoever said the quest for love wasn't comical, never met Charlene Randall. Her search to find Mr. Wonderful leads her to the last place she ever expected—the arms of her neighbor.*

Owner of a successful company, Damien Giovanni is fed up with

*money-grabbing women. But Charley isn't like this. She wants to try the Internet article, 10 Ways to Melt a Man's Heart on his former friend. Jealousy hits him head on like a locomotive*



Always, My Love  
by Phyllis Campbell

*without a driver. What would happen if he tried the "10 Ways"  
on her?*

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