

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

ROGUE'S
Diamond

SAHARA
KELLY

ELLORA'S CAVE
Quickies

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Rogue's Diamond

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ROGUE'S DIAMOND

Sahara Kelly

Acknowledgements

To all the charming residents of Beaulieu, my thanks. It's a small place, barely more than several intersecting lanes, but it holds history quietly in the palm of its hand. The Abbey, for which it is most famous, dates back nearly a thousand years.

If you are ever in England, I recommend Beaulieu in Hampshire as a destination not to be missed. There are swans on the river...not the same ones my heroine refers to, but probably their descendants. Some things are eternal...Beaulieu is one of them.

Chapter One

La Diamanté watched as her servant took the knocker off the door. She'd called this place home for longer than she'd expected. But now it was done.

She was packed, the carriage containing her possessions on its way south. It was time to leave London, to bid farewell to the discreet little cul-de-sac on the fringes of Mayfair. To turn her back on what had been and look toward what was to come.

She sighed, leaning back into the soft squabs of the carriage. "'Tis done, Harriet. Over."

"High time too," said Harriet. "I never liked what you did, my lady. I understand why, but I'm glad you're done with it."

La Diamanté grinned. "Firstly, as I've told you so often, I'm not *your Lady* anymore. Secondly, there was no other option. Thirdly, what I did resulted in a tidy sum for us both to live on. You may not be sorry I'm done, but I'm not sorry I started in the first place."

A snort greeted her words and the carriage jerked into motion, taking the two women away from the past and into their future.

What it would be – well, that was anyone's guess.

In truth, she was not sorry to be done with that life either. She'd accumulated a solid nest egg, enjoyed the favors of several wealthy lovers and could now quietly retire, knowing that her name would linger amongst the ranks of famous courtesans for a while yet.

There was one unfinished piece of business, of course. There always was. One couldn't drive away from one's past scot-free. And this particular business would haunt her for the rest of her days.

It had a name—*Rogue Chambers*.

La Diamanté closed her eyes, allowing herself the rare luxury of remembering the one man who had touched more than her body.

They'd first met at the theater—a flash of intersecting gazes, she in Sir Henry Fowler's box and he across the huge space with friends in their own box. She'd shivered for a second but waited for the interval to inquire casually about the tall man in uniform.

Colonel Carrick Chambers, she'd been told. Recently returned from the continent. Decorated hero, mentioned by Wellington in dispatches, all the usual encomiums heaped on returning soldiers.

She'd listened with half an ear, the rest of her brain wondering about the broad shoulders, the dark hair lit with streaks of red fire and his eyes—hot whiskey glittering with flecks of gold and green. How she knew that from across a theater she had no idea, but she'd been quite convinced of their color.

The next day a bouquet had arrived with his name on the card. Not the lush arrangement of heavily scented roses she was used to—no, this had been a posy of violets in a silver holder.

Because they reminded me of your eyes the note had said.

He'd noticed her as well. Even down to the unusual violet-blue of *her* eyes.

From the posy to an introduction was the matter of barely a week. From the introduction to her bed, mere hours. They'd shared a mutual awareness of the flaming desire erupting between them almost instantly.

He knew who and what she was, yet did not offer her money. He merely requested the chance to visit. Many did, few were accepted.

But as soon as he closed her door behind him, the veneer of courtesy had been ripped away. He'd walked to her, stared into her eyes and spoken the least number of words possible.

"I want you. Now."

Today, six months after that momentous night, La Diamanté still felt her heart beat faster as she reviewed the memory.

Had she spoken? She couldn't recall if she'd said anything or gone to him and reached for his head, bringing her lips to hers. The fire had ignited in an instant, their lips touching with a heat that shot straight to her breasts, then further until her thighs ached to part and welcome him between them.

He was hard, his cock ramming against her silk covered belly as he devoured her mouth, stealing her breath from her, stealing her soul...

And when they were naked, mere seconds later, it only got better, hotter, an explosive melding of hands, mouths and bodies. This man knew his way around a woman, but what was better—or worse—he knew his way around *her*.

His fingers had found her clitoris, strumming it in that softly demanding way she adored. His mouth suckled her breasts with just the right amount of pressure at just the right time, gently at first then more harshly as her arousal grew beyond anything she could have imagined.

They rolled over each other, a tumble of fierce desire, a fight to see who would dominate the exchange of passion, a battle where both would claim victory. She'd taken his cock in her mouth, making him groan as she found his particular sweet spot beneath the flaring rim. She'd licked away his moisture, tasting his unique flavor. She'd inhaled his scent, learned his body and lost herself while she did it.

He'd followed her lead, pulling away from her to delve between her thighs, burying his face in her pussy with a laugh, teasing her, licking her swollen folds, driving her insane and making her writhe beneath him.

And finally the moment had arrived, the moment when his cock entered her cunt, sliding its way through slick honey and into her body where it filled and stretched her like no other cock had ever done.

They'd both frozen as their bodies touched, his cock buried to the hilt, her inner muscles holding it with a strength she'd never imagined possible. They shared a look, an instant of time that lasted for what seemed like an eternity.

Then he began to move, riding her slowly, not building the pace until he sensed she was with him, keeping in step with his every thrust, meeting his strokes with ripples of her own.

The climax? Beyond imagining. A shattering of everything she was, every belief she'd held about her own sexuality.

In that moment, La Diamanté knew it all had to end. There would never be another Rogue Chambers in her life. Every man after him would fall short.

Her life as an exclusive member of the demimonde was finished.

She sent Sir Henry Fowler away the next night as politely as possible. She returned the diamonds Rogue had sent the following day. She contacted her man of business and told him to liquidate every asset she'd amassed. She took her gems to a discreet jeweler and sold all the pieces she'd hoarded over the last few years.

And here she was, wearing only her mother's wedding ring, with none of the elegant gowns she'd made her trademark and not one of the diamonds that had given her the nickname "La Diamanté".

That woman, that glittering light of the half-world inhabited by the Ton and their mistresses, was now dead. Vanished like the unreal image she'd presented. A myth, a ghost, a vision of something that could never have sustained its existence.

La Diamanté was no more.

Ennis Cranborne, only child of the late Duke of Cranborne, was heading south to find herself a new life and leaving everything in her past behind. Except for one thing.

The memory of a tall handsome man and a night of passion that had changed her world forever.

* * * * *

His horse was lame.

Colonel Carrick Chambers cursed luridly, the words falling with an ease he'd learned young and perfected fighting Napoleon alongside brave men who never watched their language.

He'd ridden from Buckler's Hard to Beaulieu later than he'd anticipated, hoping to check in at the Regimental Headquarters and still make it back to Calshot before dark. But Marcus and his wife had been entrancing company and his stay at their farm had become extended.

He shrugged and dismounted. He might not find a blacksmith at this hour, but he could probably snabble himself a room for the night. Not, he told himself, with the Regimental commander, either.

Neither man liked the other, but tolerated their interactions as a necessity. Rogue Chambers had earned his sobriquet and apparently his commanding officer found that quite distasteful.

Damned man-milliner. Rogue doubted he'd ever served on a front line, but simply ridden to his position on the backs of reports and paperwork. Something a seasoned soldier like Rogue found sticking in his craw. Too many good men died while impotent idiots pushed pens over foolscap and waited out the messy business of killing in the comfort of their offices.

Now Rogue was enduring the quiet of rural Hampshire and a dead-end appointment to the Revenue officers watching the tranquil waters of the Solent in case any vicious smugglers should attempt to bypass the tariffs on imported goods and offer some fine French brandy to unwary civilians. Most of whom would welcome the chance to indulge themselves and turn a blind eye to the lack of a customs stamp.

All because he'd fucked the wrong woman.

He'd had no idea when he'd set eyes on her that Sir Henry Fowler considered La Diamanté his *exclusive* property. The lady herself hadn't mentioned Fowler at all. Not

that he'd given her chance, since one look and all Rogue could think of was getting her naked beneath him.

And when he'd accomplished this mission—devil take it, the woman had nearly killed him with her passion. Their night together had repercussions—and not *just* his reappointment as far away from London as Fowler could manage without explaining his reasons.

No, the repercussion that plagued Rogue was the memory of a pair of violet-blue eyes and the scent of a woman's pussy, the soft thighs, the hot-as-sin cunt, the scream when she shuddered her way into an orgasm that demanded he share it and drove his wits clean out of his head.

He stifled another curse as his cock stiffened, trying to clear his mind of recollections of the woman he should never have fucked. A woman who was a courtesan, a mistress—little more than an elegant whore.

Trudging back into Beaulieu, Rogue frowned. That was wrong—she was no whore, he'd bet a month's pay on it. There was something about her, some subtle innocence in her body and her smile. In spite of her life, there were parts of her that had perhaps remained untouched. Secrets behind those eyes he'd like to discover. While she was naked and shuddering, of course. That was the best time to delve into a woman's head—while one was delving into her cunt.

His horse whinnied, a sign that other horses were around. A light glowing ahead told him he'd made his way back to the village through the deepening darkness and he blessed his stars the inn was the first building on the street leading to the village center.

It was time to stop thinking about a dalliance that should have meant nothing in the overall scheme of things and start focusing on necessities like a room for the night. He was turning into a moonstruck fool, letting his brain linger on La Diamanté.

Sometimes he could swear he detected her fragrance in the air. Sometimes he even thought he saw her. Like that woman just emerging from the inn. Same height, same build, same hair—

Rogue Chambers froze.

By God, it was her.

"Ma'am?" He tugged his horse and strode to the gravel drive fronting the inn.
"Pardon me, ma'am?"

She turned, her face veiled and shadowed by a wisp of embroidered lace from her bonnet. "Sir?"

"I—er..." Rogue's voice tapered off as he stared at her, trying to make out her features in the darkness. He sought for words but nothing that he wanted to say would come out right.

Have we fucked?

Are you La Diamanté, mistress to few and the lover who turned my brains inside out?

No, neither of those would do. If only she'd lift that veil or say something, not just stand there staring at him.

"I believe we know each other?" Rogue could have bitten his tongue off. He sounded like an idiot and an importunate idiot at that. Any man who used those words in such surroundings could have gotten his face slapped if the lady was so inclined.

Thankfully, she didn't misinterpret his question as an invitation to illicit activities. She tilted her head. "I'm sorry. I believe you're mistaken."

Then she turned and walked away.

Bloody *walked away* without another word.

Rogue gazed at her back, the simple gown swaying with her hips as she moved.

It *was* her, he'd put money on it. He knew that ass, those curves, even covered with a dull gray skirt. Her hair was pulled into a lump at her nape and her hem was definitely muddy. She looked like any country gentlewoman — on the surface.

But every instinct Rogue Chambers possessed was screaming at him to go after her. Coincidentally his cock was throbbing as well, something he was used to in connection

with his thoughts about La Diamanté, but something that hadn't occurred much of late with regard to other women.

He couldn't follow her, though. That would be quite outside the pale as far as acceptable behavior was concerned.

He bit down on his arousal and turned to the inn. He would find out what the hell was going on. And soon. Because if that woman was indeed who he thought she was — they were going to be naked together in as short a time as Rogue could manage.

And stay that way for a hell of a lot longer than just one night.

Chapter Two

Ennis' hands trembled as she pulled a key from her reticule and let herself into the cottage she called home.

"That you, Miss Ennis?"

"I'm home, Harriet." She latched the door. "I could use a cup of tea."

"Kettle's hot." A clatter from the kitchen heralded the warming of the teapot and a welcome chance to breathe once more.

Ennis walked down the hall into the room that served as kitchen, dining room and parlor on occasion. The formal front room was reserved for customers of her little dressmaking business.

"You get Mrs. Chauncy's gown to her all right?" Harriet poured boiling water onto tea leaves and sniffed appreciatively as the brew began to steep.

"Yes. She was happy I could repair the lace. She paid up too." Ennis shook her reticule and Harriet smiled at the jingle. They weren't in financial difficulties, but a little extra was always welcome.

She slipped out of her pelisse and sat down at the table.

"Everything else all right?" Harriet glanced at her.

"Oh yes. Yes indeed." Ennis stared absently at the tabletop.

A cup of tea intruded into her vision and she nodded her thanks, sipping it and trying to push away the vision of a man in uniform, staring at her with unforgettable brown eyes.

"Miss Ennis." Harriet snapped her fingers, attracting her attention. "My *lady*. What happened?"

Ennis' head jerked and she found herself pinned by a firm gaze. Harriet knew her too well for comfort sometimes.

"I saw someone. A man who thought he recognized me. Thought he knew me."

Harriet continued to stare at her. "And did he?"

Ennis couldn't quite meet her gaze. "I think I convinced him otherwise."

"You didn't answer my question. Does he know you?"

"Yes." She sucked in a breath. "Very well. Very well indeed."

"Oh Lord. 'Tis *him*, isn't it?" Harriet leaned back, closing her eyes.

"Him? Him who?" Ennis blinked.

"Him as in the *him* who changed everything. The *him* who made you shut up shop in London, turn your back on that life—for which I'm grateful, don't get me wrong—and the *him* who keeps you awake nights, tossing and turning. And when you do sleep, you dream and moan and —"

"Harriet, that's enough." Ennis stood abruptly. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Harriet's shoulders slumped and her expression softened. "Dearie, I've been with you for more years than I can remember. I know you, girl and woman. I know your face like it was my own. Better, in fact." She picked up her cup but put it back down again without drinking. "Everything had a pattern in London until one night. Until that one man came to the door. The next day you were different. And from that point on all you wanted to do was end it. Get out of town. Escape the life you led and move to something new. I'm not an idiot. I know he had something—if not everything—to do with it."

Ennis stood silently for a few moments then nodded. "Yes, you're right. It was him. Colonel Carrick Chambers. They call him Rogue. That night with him in London—well, after that I knew I couldn't go on." She twisted her hands together. "But now the blasted man's turned up here, in Beaulieu of all places. Just where I don't want him to

be. And he's not the type to let go of something, either. If he *still* thinks I am who he believes..."

"What are you going to do?" Harriet looked at her. "You could just ignore him..."

Ennis snorted. "And have him turn the village upside down tomorrow looking for *La Diamanté*? That's precisely what we don't need." She squared her shoulders. "No, I'll have to go and see him. Ask him as a gentleman to respect my privacy and my new life." She reached for her hair and pulled out the pins, letting the curls tumble loosely down her spine. "I must change."

"Ennis..."

"Don't concern yourself, dear Harriet. I can handle one man without a problem." She unfastened her collar and headed for the door. "I shall simply ask for a moment of his time. He's no tattletale. He's a soldier, for God's sake. And he was in Wellington's train too. If I can't trust him, then who *can* I trust?"

She fled the room, missing Harriet's parting comment.

"You may be able to trust him, but can you trust *yourself*?"

* * * * *

Ennis stood outside his door, her heart pounding loud enough to wake the other guests. Thanks to her knowledge of the inn and the number of trips she'd made there on dressmaking matters, she'd managed to make her way upstairs without attracting attention and her luck was clearly in, since she'd caught a snippet of conversation about the "Colonel in room nine" wanting hot water.

Quietly, Ennis lurked in the shadows as the lad left the room, thanking his benefactor for the coin that gleamed in his palm as he trotted back downstairs.

And now – well there was no time like the present to do what needed to be done.

Taking a nervous breath, she knocked softly on the door.

Instantly it swung inward. And every thought Ennis had, every carefully rehearsed phrase, flew out of her head at the sight before her.

Rogue Chambers stood there, arm on the door, naked from the waist up with his breeches unbuttoned. He was barefoot, she noticed, as her gaze wandered up and down the over six foot of firmly muscled masculinity glowing in the light of a single candle.

When she met his eyes, those luminous warm pools with their distinctive touches of gold and green, her lungs constricted and for a second or two she forgot to breathe. He stared at her with a strange expression on his face.

She knew what she wanted to say. She'd worked it all out in her mind as she'd dressed and walked the short distance from her cottage to the inn. But all that planning was for naught. One look at him and the words that came from her mouth were those that began in her memory and her heart, not her head.

"I want you. Now."

If she could have swallowed them back she would have, but it was too late.

He reached for her, eyes shining as he pulled her into the room and latched the door behind her. Then she was in his arms, against his chest, breathing in the scent of him as he bent his head to find her mouth.

"I knew it was you. I knew it."

She barely heard the words since they were followed by a harshly devouring kiss, lips clashing, tongues thrusting hungrily into mouths, bodies twining and rubbing and parting only to join once more as they both surrendered to the inevitable.

They struggled with her clothing, she trying to pull her cloak free, he trying to strip her out of her dress without further ado.

"Wait..." She untied the fastening at her neck and let the cloak fall to the floor.

"I can't." He tugged roughly on the fabric, forcing her dress and chemise down over her arms, baring her breasts.

Imprisoned by her garments, she could only watch as he reverently lifted one in his hand. *"I've dreamed of these, of my mouth on these nipples."* He smiled as the bud hardened even more. *"I've remembered their taste every damn night since..."*

His voice tapered off as he leaned to take one between his lips, biting down and making her shiver with pleasure. Swirling his tongue he teased her into breathless heat, sending tingles down through her body to her pussy.

"More..." Her head fell back and she closed her eyes as his other hand toyed with her skin, stroking her neck, her chest and finally the other breast where his thumb flickered and made her moan.

Ennis' body was moist and her juices dampened her thighs. She hated the rasp of her clothes against her – she wanted his body doing that, not some silken gown.

Fidgeting, she managed to free her arms and push her clothing down, shamelessly baring herself to his eyes, needy and wanton now as his touch ignited that flame buried so deeply inside her.

She held his head to her breast, her fingers sliding through the soft strands of hair. "Oh God." She sighed the words, a prayer of thankfulness that his mouth was claiming her once more, an expression of delight at the pleasure a simple touch could create.

He pulled away, his saliva leaving her breasts chilled where the air touched them. "Glorious. Wonderful." His hands were everywhere, stroking her sides, her back, her buttocks, pulling her close so that he could press her naked breasts to his chest and abrade her nipples with his skin.

He stepped back, reaching for his breeches. "The bed."

Ennis glanced around and noticed the linens turned back, ready for its occupant. Or occupants as the case might be.

She moved to it and lay down, lost to all shame or self-consciousness with this man. On her back, she settled her head onto the pillow and waited, bending one leg at the knee and letting him see how ready she was.

"Are you sure?" He stood nude beside her, cock rigid and protruding from its nest of dark hair.

"Can't you tell?" She lifted an eyebrow and parted her thighs wider, reaching between them to spread the drenched folds with her fingers. "Look at me. I want you. In any and all ways there are."

"I won't be gentle tonight. I've waited too long for that." He stared at her pussy. "Six months. Six months you've haunted my every waking moment and most of my sleeping ones too."

His hand drifted to her mound sliding into her juices. "Six long months of not even knowing another woman is in the same room. Six months of feeling this—this *obsession* riding on my shoulders."

"I know."

The bed dipped as he lowered himself to kneel between her thighs and slip two fingers into her cunt, moving them around, learning her anew. "Six months of using my hand on myself whenever my need for you got too great."

Ennis burned at the image he created in her mind.

"Six fucking *months*..."

His hands slipped under her and he lifted her buttocks, pulling her down to rest on his knees. "I can't wait a second longer."

And he thrust his cock into her, forcefully, hard and without a check.

Ennis cried out—and thrust back.

* * * * *

Rogue had learned long ago to trust his gut. So when the tentative knock sounded at his door, he wasn't completely surprised to open it and see *her* there.

But gut feeling notwithstanding, she took his breath away.

The long black hair was twisted loosely now, one thick curl falling over the gray stuff that covered her. And she was looking at him with those glorious purple-blue eyes like he was a meal and she was starving.

Tossing his own words back at him was an extra bonus. How well he remembered saying the same thing when he'd walked into her London foyer. It was nothing but the truth then and it was still the truth now.

Between them lay something extraordinary, a desire that passed beyond what anyone would describe as normal. An inferno that smoldered until they were within striking distance of each other. Then it was flint to dry tinder and the flame exploded into life.

His cock swelled as he closed the door and was erect before he even touched her. Her scent, her presence so near to his naked chest—her breasts bursting free from her gown, all sent Rogue over the edge into a maelstrom of sexual desire the likes of which he couldn't remember experiencing before.

It was as if the last six months of near-celibacy were about to erupt tonight, in this quiet room with this amazing woman.

He wanted to be gentle, to arouse her passions, to take her with him on the journey as his heat burned fiercely and his cock ached to be inside her. But he knew he couldn't. He could *not* hold back this crushing need that threatened to choke him and make him come just from looking at her as she fought free of her clothes and held his head to her breasts.

When she lay down and showed him her pussy, shining pink and swollen, the evidence of her desire tipped him over the edge and he was inside her before he had chance to think with his brain instead of his cock.

Then it was too late.

He was surrounded by soft skin, the scent that had plagued him for so long and the boiling silk of her cunt, gripping him with a ferocious strength that sapped any thoughts of technique lingering in his mind.

He had thrust deeply and hard, yet would do it again—and he did. She met each move with thrusts of her own, almost fighting to obtain the maximum contact, the deepest penetration of his cock into her welcoming body.

She squirmed and slithered on his thighs, her buttocks rubbing his flesh, her cunt clamping down then releasing his cock, her timing a perfect match to his movements, her panting breaths a counterpoint to his own.

When her legs lifted and her ankles locked low on his spine, he was lost. In this position he could plunge as deep as he wanted—as he needed—and he took full advantage, hammering his cock rapidly now, his balls tight, his body sweating with the force of his movements.

“Oh *please...*” Her neck arched back as she bowed in his arms, all heat and need.

“Yes, my lady. *Yesss...*”

His cock rammed into her, his lungs seized and he watched as their bodies joined in one final thrust, one last fulfilling slide of man into woman. The gleam from their liquids shone on both of them, a blend of passion that dewed her short curls and drenched his own where they tangled together.

She broke, a sharp cry heralding the beginnings of her release, echoed by the minute shudders he felt within her, rippling over his cock with increasing intensity.

It was enough to break Rogue too. His balls trembled and his cock swelled even more, gloved tightly by the shivering walls of her cunt. He erupted, exploding into her body, his spurts milked from him by the force of her climax. She seized his passion and demanded every drop of his seed, spasms of pleasure stroking him into the oblivion of emptiness and a place where there was nothing but the blinding light of completion.

She lingered there, still shaking, still stroking his cock with light tremors as her orgasm faded. Finally, her muscles relaxed and her legs dropped to the bed.

“Oh God.”

She lay limp and boneless, dewed with sweat—some of it probably his. Regretfully he slipped his softened cock from her cunt, smiling as their mingled liquids eased its path. He’d branded her, marked her with his seed, ended six months of yearning in one massive explosion he’d shared—with her. The woman of his dreams.

Tumbling down beside her, he pulled her close to his body, waited for his heart to slow down and simply stroked her, enjoying the texture of her skin. Her pulse fluttered in her neck as she lay quietly in his embrace.

Rogue took a breath. "So tell me, *La Diamanté*. Who are you? And what the hell are you doing here in Beaulieu?"

Chapter Three

Ennis dragged bits and pieces of her mind and body back from the ether into which Rogue had sent them flying.

This time seemed even more intense than the first—but perhaps it was because she knew what to expect, or maybe that she had waited for it, wanted it for so long. Whatever the reason, it had proved once and for all that Rogue Chambers was the only man who could fulfill her beyond her imaginings and drive her over the edge into exquisite madness.

Now she had to pay the price. Telling him the truth—and she would do no less—might well signal the end of anything that lay between them.

Last time he'd left while she slept. This time—if only he would doze or something perhaps she could sneak out. But even that wouldn't work. Not here in the tiny village of Beaulieu.

No, there were no other options for Ennis. She must tell him what he needed to know. Then she could walk away from him forever.

"My name is Ennis." She sighed. "I live here now."

Rogue snorted. "I'm sure you do."

"Really." She turned her head to see an incredulous look cross his face. "La Diamanté is no more. She's dead." Ennis frowned a little. "I returned your bracelet to you. I closed up my apartments. I thought you knew."

He blinked. "I had no idea. I got the bracelet back but I was sent out of London within days of meeting you. I've been down here ever since." Ruefully he tapped her elbow with one finger. "I thought perhaps you didn't like the jewelry."

"Oh no. It was beautiful. It was just that I couldn't accept it. Not after...well, not after that night."

"I don't understand."

Ennis swallowed and eased away from him a little. This wasn't going the way she'd planned. She'd hoped he'd settle for the facts of the situation, not her emotions. She did not want those involved at all.

She chose her words carefully. "In London, I was little more than a whore. You know that. It paid off handsomely but wasn't how I'd planned on spending my life. Nor did I want to degenerate into a—a prostitute, like so many others. It was simply a stopgap, a way to accumulate enough money to escape—well, escape all of it, I suppose."

It was Rogue's turn to frown. "Say what you like, but you could never be a whore. It's not possible. You're not the type."

A quick smile curved her lips. "Thank you for that. But we both know how easily someone like La Diamanté can become little more than a joke or a source of scandal. Look at Harriette Wilson."

Rogue shrugged at the reference to one of London's current salacious *on-dits*. "Are you planning on blackmailing anyone with your memoirs?"

"Certainly not."

"Then there's no comparison." He waved his hand dismissively. "All right, so you sold up everything and left London. Now you're here...doing what?"

"I'm a dressmaker." Ennis lifted her chin. "And a good one too."

Rogue bit his lip, but she could see the laughter in his eyes. She wanted to punch him. Then kiss that tiny grin away.

"I'm sure you are." He turned sober. "The question is — *why*?"

"Why? I have to do *something* with my life. I bought the cottage I'm living in with my friend Harriet. Do you expect me to do nothing? To wander aimlessly around Beaulieu admiring the swans?"

"Well no, but —"

"There you are then. Few people down here are aware there ever was a woman called La Diamanté. Even fewer would connect the new dressmaker with a diamond-bedecked mistress. No, 'tis what I want now. A quiet life, a world of my own, under my control where I can..."

"Where you can what, Ennis?" He reached for her again, finding her leg this time and stroking it gently. "Where you can disappear?"

"Sort of." Goose bumps lifted on her body as he continued to caress her bare leg. "So you see, when you recognized me...I was frightened. The only thing I risk is somebody passing through and making the connection, whether on purpose or accidentally. I was hoping that now, the way I live, the way I dress — well, I was keeping my fingers crossed that this situation wouldn't arise."

She met his gaze. "I need to ask you to promise me something. To promise, on your honor as a gentleman, that you won't betray my identity."

Rogue stared back at her, his eyes filled with some odd expression she couldn't put a name to. "And what do I get in return?"

Ennis swallowed. "What do you want?"

"Everything."

* * * * *

Rogue was doing his best to absorb what Ennis told him. But, given that she was naked, they were lying in bed together and the air was filled with the rich fragrance of woman and sex, he was failing dismally.

His cock was half hard again, just from the mere touch of his fingers on her skin. He could spend weeks just stroking her. So when he'd spoken the first word in his head — *everything* — it was, God help him, the utter truth.

He waited for her answer.

Blue-violet eyes roamed over his face then down to where his hand rested on her calf. "You already have it. Whatever you want, take it. Whatever you need, I will give."

The words were soft, but they could have been a burning coal since they sparked a blaze in Rogue's balls and sent a shudder of excitement down his spine.

He shifted and cupped her pussy. "Can you take me again?"

She sighed and parted her legs, pushing her mound into his palm. "Yes. Oh yes."

"I warned you I wouldn't be gentle." He rose up then, urging her to roll over on her stomach. "I can't get enough of you. I don't know if I ever will."

"Tonight whatever we do will not be enough. Yet it must suffice."

Those were odd words, but the roaring of his blood in his ears muffled them and Rogue let them pass, intent as he was on lifting her hips and settling pillows beneath them.

Her ass was magnificent, white and rounded, firm where it should be firm and curved in all the right places. Shamelessly she leaned into the bed, offering her buttocks to him without hesitation.

Her pussy gleamed wetly, still drenched with their juices.

Rogue's heart turned over at the sight, swollen and rosy folds of flesh bearing the evidence of his desire.

Hard now, but without the desperate need to be inside her that had seared his soul earlier, Rogue moved behind her and rubbed the head of his cock slowly over those shining lips, loving the heated sensation of their moisture, their silken kiss as they slid over his arousal.

She moaned, a deep sigh that drifted around them both.

"Yes." Rogue watched their bodies. "It is *that* good, isn't it?" He rested a hand on one white buttock as he toyed with her, loving the soft passion of this unique moment, relishing the growing need to be inside her yet appreciating the fact that he wasn't.

"Rogue, your touch—'tis like no other." She shifted and leaned back into him, urging him on.

He simply continued his play, slipping the swollen length between her thighs to caress her clitoris then dragging it back to tease the opening of her cunt. In her cleft, her rosy muscles twitched hungrily and Rogue dared to slide his cock over them too, leaving a trail of moisture.

Her shiver of delight matched his as he did it again—and again. "You like this, Ennis."

"Oh yes, yes I do." She lifted her body then, raising herself up onto all fours. "'Tis not unusual for a man to take his pleasure that way." She gasped a little as Rogue spread her buttocks gently with his hands. "No risk of fathering a child."

Carefully, Rogue pressed his cock between the white mounds, barely breaching her but making his intentions known. "Am I hurting you?"

"No. You're big but I think I can take you."

Senses flaring at her words, Rogue moved again, this time penetrating her a little, sliding inward past the tight muscles and pausing once more. He wasn't as desperate as he'd been earlier. He could afford to take his time and make it pleasurable for Ennis as well as himself.

She was so tight, so strong, gripping him fiercely as he entered her darkest place. A groan strangled in his throat and he freed one hand to find her clitoris and tease it softly, encouraging her to come with him along the path to a different kind of pleasure.

As he fondled her clitoris the clasp on his cock eased and he filled her—slowly, wonderfully, burying himself in her with her full cooperation. When he was completely inside he stopped, marveling at the way they fit, the incredible awe he felt at the sensation of this woman's ass, her skin, her passion.

She was sobbing a little, tiny gasps that heralded her approaching peak. "Dear God, Rogue. I can't hold on..."

The shudders built around Rogue's cock and he began to move, as aroused as she by this joining. His fingers slipped over her clit, feeling it hard and thrusting from beneath the delicate folds of her flesh. He held back the urge to pound into her, prolonging his own climax with rhythmic strokes, managing to fight his needs in order to satisfy hers.

They rode this way for several minutes, the heat between them rising to levels that made Rogue's balls tremble and Ennis' whole body shake with the onrush of release. Eventually, he could hold back no more and with several quick thrusts he exploded, the throbbing and pulsing of his cock tipping Ennis over into her orgasm.

Together they cried out, a melded jumble of clamping spasms and drenching liquids, soaring higher than Rogue could ever have imagined. Spots danced in front of his eyes as he emptied himself into Ennis for the second time that night. When they finally parted to collapse on the bed, both were limp and boneless, lacking the strength to do more than gasp needed breath into starving lungs.

"Oh dear God in heaven." Ennis managed the words as she shifted into a more comfortable position and yanked the pillows out from beneath her belly. "I believe you have killed me stone dead."

"Possibly." Rogue groaned. "But since I'm dead too, what does it matter?" He yawned and shifted onto his side. "Mind you, I seem to have one hell of a heartbeat thumping in my ears, so perhaps we're not dead. Yet."

Ennis chuckled tiredly. "Couldn't tell it by me."

She snuggled into his arms as if designed by nature to lie there, her hips and legs a perfect fit to his.

Rogue could not remember ever feeling so sated, so *blissful*. He floated, lost in a cloud of languid delight.

"I can't stay long." She sighed and inched even closer, giving the lie to her words. "I won't risk being seen leaving at some ungodly hour."

"I know," Rogue agreed sadly.

But before he slid into sleep, he made himself a promise. This would not be another brief affair. He was damned if he'd spend the next six months living on memories of these stolen moments. "I will come and see you. Discreetly, I promise."

"All right." She sounded resigned. "There are other things we need to speak of. But they can wait for now."

Forcing back the urge to slip into dreams, Rogue stirred. "Where do you live?"

"Larkspur Cottage. 'Tis the last house on the lane off the main road."

"I'll find it." Content, he rested his head on the pillow and dropped a light kiss on Ennis' shoulder.

And slept.

When he awoke, it was to the dawn—and Ennis was gone.

Chapter Four

Luck was with her on this eventful night.

Ennis made her way stealthily home, avoiding the few people still about and keeping to the shadows. Not even the barking of a dog marked her passage.

She unlocked her door, crept along the hallway and finally heaved a sigh of relief as she closed her bedroom door without disturbing a sleeping Harriet. As she undressed, her body still trembled with the aftereffects of Rogue's loving.

Ennis washed away the evidence of their mingled passion then scrambled into her nightgown and slid beneath the covers, hoping for at least a couple of hours rest. Would he come tomorrow? The next day? He hadn't said. Her thoughts tumbled over each other, refusing let her drift into sleep.

She must have napped for over an hour in his arms, waking to the unusual sound of a snore, loud and raspy, not two inches from her ear. Ennis had always encouraged her lovers to leave after they were finished. Something they seemed ready to do, since few were inclined to arrive at their homes early in the morning wearing the same clothes they'd left in the night before. She was happy to have it that way. It wasn't as if she wanted them there for longer than absolutely necessary.

But that was her past, in London. This was now, in Beaulieu. Her old life had intruded on the present in a huge way.

She knew she would have lain in Rogue's warm embrace all night if it had been possible, and likely would have been ready to welcome him between her thighs when they awoke at dawn.

It was—*different* with him. It wasn't fucking anymore. It had gone beyond the simple function that mated a man and a woman.

She'd known this the first time they'd bedded each other—it was the motivation behind her decision to end the existence of La Diamanté. Ennis had discovered she was capable of feeling desire, passion, even lust for a man.

It had frightened her and shown her how unfulfilling her present life was. She'd managed to achieve her status by completely removing any emotional component from her bedroom.

Sex was simply a means to an end for La Diamanté. It wasn't for Ennis Cranborne. Not anymore.

Not after a night with Rogue Chambers.

Tossing on her bed, Ennis tried to find some perspective, some quiet place in her mind that wasn't filled with *him*. But it was impossible. She could still detect the scent of his body, still see the light in his eyes when he'd taken her, the cords in his neck stretched taut as he'd poured himself into her.

The memories blinded her, sent her heart thudding once more and even made her ache for him to do it again, tired and sore though she was.

Crossly, she punched her pillow. "Damn the man." He haunted her, a vital and vivid presence in her head and other parts of her. And that was the one thing he couldn't be—part of her life.

At long last sleep claimed her, but it seemed barely a moment before Harriet was shaking her shoulder.

"Miss Ennis, you must wake up."

"Hmmf? Whaaa..."

"Miss Ennis, *please*—" Harriet's hand was insistent, refusing to let Ennis sink back into slumber. "You must wake, dearie. There's a man at the door asking for you."

Ennis bolted upright. *He'd come. Already.*

She leaped from the bed, astounding Harriet. "Oh my goodness. What time is it? I don't have a moment to waste. Damn. I shan't be able to bathe. Quickly Harriet. Is there any hot water on the fire? I need my best gown—"

She scampered around the room, whisking dresses from her wardrobe, barely avoiding Harriet who was staring at her with worried eyes.

"Miss Ennis. Whatever are you doing? Are you going back to—to what used to be?"

Ennis paused, a blue silk pelisse in her hand. "Harriet, what on earth are you babbling about?"

"The man at the door, Miss Ennis. It's a messenger from *Sir Henry Fowler*. You're to go to the headquarters building immediately."

And Ennis' heart suddenly stopped beating, only to resume a moment later when it dropped down to the soles of her feet.

* * * * *

Filled with an unusual enthusiasm for life in general, Rogue Chambers managed to get his horse re-shod in record time and was on his way to the barracks in Calshot before the full light of day flooded the countryside.

He'd made his plans while waiting at the smithy's—check in with his men, and then return to Beaulieu and Ennis' arms. He knew where she lived now. There would be no escaping him, no disappearing or missing each other. They'd fortuitously arrived at a place where they could be together and that was that.

He still couldn't believe that she'd left him while he slept—he was a soldier, for God's sake, trained to be alert to the slightest movement around him. How she'd dressed and left the room without him knowing was still something that amazed him.

Of course, he had been completely exhausted. Fabulous sex did that to a man. *Two* bouts of fabulous sex—well, he supposed there was some excuse. He'd just have to see what happened after the next two sessions in her bed.

Something else gnawed at the back of Rogue's brain, however. Something about her name...

Ennis. An unusual but not unique name. And she hadn't given him her surname. Accident or deliberate oversight? There was an irritant tickling his thoughts, just outside his ability to grasp it and take a good look at it. Something in London, perhaps, something he'd heard?

Not recently, that was certain. He hadn't been in London that long after returning from the Continent—barely a matter of weeks—before finding himself banished to Calshot. No, whatever he'd heard had to be before he'd gone to Belgium with Wellington.

Which put it at close to five years ago or so, the time when he frittered away months in the salons—and the beds—of the Ton.

Slamming his barracks door behind him, he dwelt on the niggling wraith that hovered nearby, barely pausing to yell at his sergeant that he was heading back to Beaulieu and didn't know when he'd return.

The man lifted an eyebrow, nodded and then returned to his perusal of some penny-dreadful pamphlet about dark, blood-hungry creatures of the night. Rogue winced as he left. *This* was what the British fighting forces had been reduced to. Monitoring a coastline to see that nothing happened and when nothing *did* happen, they whiled away the hours reading whatever awful literature made its way across their desks. That—and file reports which doubtless were burned with last night's rubbish.

Rogue took the reins from the stable boy—who probably provided the reading material to his men, come to think of it—nodded at him and mounted, eager to be on his way.

To Beaulieu, where he had an engagement with a lady named Ennis. In Larkspur Cottage. Maybe even the bedroom of Larkspur Cottage, if she was so inclined. He certainly was.

He'd spent a good portion of his waking hours thus far with an erection that would have done a randy youth proud. He was anxious to put it to good use with the woman who had caused it in the first place.

He cantered down the path toward the road to Beaulieu, then—before heading northwest—he reined in his horse.

Ennis. Dammit to hell and back, what was it about that name that bothered him so?

He stared absently at the ocean, unable to put his finger on it and irate at his own forgetfulness. Then a thought occurred to him—*Marcus*. If there was anyone who could enlighten him, it was Marcus Camberley.

His friend had been a member of the Ton since God knew when, hadn't served abroad because of his mortal illness from which he was now recovered apparently, and who lived less than an hour's ride from where Rogue sat right this moment.

Did Rogue have time? Well, if he didn't choke on his own cock, then yes. He could ride over to Buckler's Hard, pick Marcus' brains and go from there to Beaulieu. It would add a couple of hours but if it scratched this nagging itch, it was bloody well worth it. And he doubted Ennis would be moving on out of his reach or otherwise disappearing. She seemed to have worked hard to create a new identity for herself. Not the sort of thing one turned one's back on at the first sign of adversity.

He frowned as he headed west for Buckler's Hard. He shouldn't be characterizing himself as an *adversity*. Through some blissful accident of fate he'd rediscovered passion with a woman who defined the word for him.

So now what, Sir Brilliant? He posed the question to himself as he paralleled the water, cantering over the turf and avoiding the gullies and chines that pitted the coastline. He knew, deep inside, he did not want to be just another in a series of lovers. Apparently Ennis felt that way too. After their night together, *she'd* changed her life completely.

Rogue faced the truth. After only two nights together, he was ready to change his life too. The last six months had been filled with memories of her—the only things that

alleviated the boredom of his current assignment. Other women had lost their appeal. He'd even heard a few jokes around the mess hall concerning his apparent lack of interest in the opposite sex.

Strangely enough, he didn't care.

As the breeze ruffled his hair, Rogue felt the world shift around him, settling into a new rhythm. His future did not lie with the military, although he'd served with distinction. He might be sequestered at the east end of no place in particular at the moment, but he could parlay his career into – what? A desk at Whitehall?

He snorted, making his horse's ears twitch.

There was nothing he'd like less on God's green earth. No, he wasn't looking to spend his life acquiring military honors off the battlefield like some he knew. He didn't want responsibility for more troops, more armies, more bloodshed. And there would be more, of that he was certain.

Humankind's ability to wage war on itself was unparalleled. Just because Waterloo had ended Napoleon's reign of carnage didn't mean there wasn't another Corsican waiting in the wings for his cue to slaughter thousands of his fellows.

No, Rogue knew with certainty the time had come for him to resign his position and take his leave of the military. He'd not imagined it, but now there was another path opening to him. A path that Ennis had shown him.

Suddenly he could see himself settled. With one woman. The right woman for him, the right wife, possibly children. He had a duty to his family although it had been years since he'd done more than pay them a flying visit.

Even then his father had raked him down for his lifestyle, rank notwithstanding.

His mother, bless her, had been more sympathetic, but even she could not understand why her son felt the need to go and get his brains blown out in England's service.

The Irish tended to think like that.

Rogue smiled as he remembered the soft green landscape of his home in Ireland. His given name—Carrick—betrayed his roots, but he'd been *Rogue* to so many for so long that his nationality had been completely forgotten, along with his brogue.

Topping the last rise, he looked down over Buckler's Hard. A sleepy little hamlet on the banks of the Beaulieu River where it met the sea, Rogue pulled up his horse and watched the boats as they scurried to and fro industriously.

Would Marcus be at home or in the village? He wasn't sure, but thought it best to visit the farmhouse first, since that's where the local builders were making substantial renovations.

If anyone liked to get involved in projects like that, it was Marcus. And Mariah, of course. They were probably both driving the workers to distraction.

Rogue spurred his horse toward the lane leading to Marcus' new home.

And found himself in luck. Marcus was outside the building, hands on hips, in his shirtsleeves, pointing at something on the roof and having an intensely earnest discussion with a laborer who nodded at everything Marcus said.

The man would probably welcome Rogue's interruption. Once Marcus got his teeth into something, he seldom let go without a battle.

"Ho, Farmer Camberley." Rogue trotted up the lane and waved to Marcus.

Who rolled his eyes. "Good God. Didn't you just leave?"

"I had such a good time, I decided to come back and do it all over again." Rogue sprang from the saddle. "A minute of your time, my friend."

Marcus clapped the worker on the shoulder. "I think it will work, Ben. Take a closer look at that place, check the structure and let's go from there."

"Yessir." The man touched his cap and took himself off, looking very relieved.

Marcus turned to Rogue and together they strolled into the shade of a chestnut tree where Marcus helped himself to a mug of water from a pitcher.

He wiped his lips then leaned against the tree. "I can't believe you want to borrow money. I don't owe you anything and I don't have a lusciously ripe woman anywhere around who doesn't belong to me. So what brings you out here looking so chipper this early in the day?"

"You wound me." Rogue looked offended. Then grinned. "One question. That's all."

"That I can do. Ask away."

"I need to know if the name *Ennis* means anything to you?" Rogue paused. "Sometime in the past I've heard it. Somewhere, someplace I can't put my finger on. It's driving me berserk, so I thought I'd drop by and ask you since you were in London a hell of a lot longer than I was. And in a lot more disreputable places too."

Marcus blinked. "Insulting a man right after you ask him for information isn't your wisest course, you know."

Rogue rolled his eyes. "I've insulted you any time over the last fifteen years. It wouldn't be right to stop now."

Marcus chuckled. "Good point. Let me think a moment. Ennis, you said?"

Rogue nodded. "Don't have a surname."

Silence fell between the two men as Marcus stared into the distance and Rogue did his best not to fidget. He wanted to be on his way to Beaulieu posthaste. And yet he wanted his question answered as well. He couldn't, of course, have both without a short wait, but he still felt the urge to rush back to his horse and ride like the wind.

To Ennis.

Marcus snapped his fingers and straightened. "I remember now. Yes, I *do* know that name..."

Chapter Five

In Larkspur Cottage, Ennis' mind spun in twelve different directions, eleven of which were pointing her to the nearest horse and the road out of Beaulieu. She wanted to run—to hide—to disappear in a puff of smoke and leave all this confusion behind.

Why now? She'd lain low for several months, praying that tucking herself away in the country would guarantee she could live her life as she wanted for once. Quietly, contentedly, simply.

She tugged on her least fashionable gown while Harriet scuttled to and fro, a worried crease between her brows.

"I don't understand it, Miss Ennis. I really don't. How did that man know you were here?"

Ennis huffed out a breath and sat down in front of her dresser, brushing and tidying her hair. "Who knows, Harriet. Perhaps someone at Lord Montfort's estate noticed me in the village and said something. Perhaps he needs a shirt repaired. I really have no idea."

"Well I don't like it." Harriet slammed a drawer shut, emphasizing her concern. "I don't like it one tiny bit." She came to stand behind Ennis and took the brush from her hands.

"I suppose it was a bit of a risk picking Beaulieu. The Montfort estate being so close and all. People were bound to come down here for the summer. People who might have seen you in London..."

Ennis bit her lip. "It seemed the best place, though, Harriet. You know that. A very tiny village near a large estate. A coaching inn. What better place for a small dress shop? There's always women needing one or two things on their journey. And any visitors to

Montfort Abbey might also need a stitch here and there. It was a risk I just had to take or we'd have been buried away in the emptiness of the Cotswolds or something."

"Maybe that would have been better." Harriet tugged a lock of hair smooth, then coiled the shining mass into a knot at the back of Ennis' head, so tight it made her eyes water. "It's not like we were hard up for money."

"I know." Ennis shrugged. "But we needed—I needed to see people now and again." *To distract me and keep my mind from going over and over memories of one particular man—one particular night.* "I'm not sure if a life of solitude would have suited me." She looked at Harriet's reflection in the mirror. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be, dearie. 'Tis just me worrying about you. That's all."

Ennis lifted her hand and covered Harriet's, where it lay on Ennis' shoulder. "Thank you, Harriet. I have no idea what I would have done without you all these years."

A moment of silence followed her words as Harriet swallowed. Then she put the final pins into Ennis' hair. "Well, that's enough of that. What's done is done. We must make the best of it."

"We must indeed." Ennis stared at herself in the little mirror. "I shall wear the hat with that heavy veil. Do you think he'll recognize me?"

Harriet snorted. "After spending nights in your bed?"

Ennis wrinkled her nose. "Don't remind me. Although I always kept only one candle lit. For everyone."

Except for Rogue. He'd taken her in the full light of a branch of candles...

"And..." Ennis continued her thoughts, "and there will be no enhancements. No powder or rouge today..."

She hadn't used any cosmetics since she'd left London. No twinkles of diamonds in her artistically coiffed hair. No sheen of powder on her skin, no slick of red geranium petals on her cheeks or lips. Little, if any, skin revealed at all.

She glanced down. Her hands were bare of adornment except for her mother's wedding band, giving strength to the lie of her widowhood. Her nails were short, her fingers roughened from needlework and harsh soaps.

There were even some freckles over her nose.

Would he recognize her? Perhaps. But Sir Henry's focus when they'd been together had most often been on the world around him and whether it was noticing the woman on his arm. Not the woman herself.

And in bed – well, unless she turned around, bent over and flipped up her skirts, he might not know her. He was one of those who preferred his sex impersonal and wasn't interested in seeing much else.

He would take her from behind, come quite rapidly then pull out, barely even remembering to say something polite as he dressed.

The man had been quite a nuisance, all things considered. His taste in diamonds was appalling and his pieces had gone to the jeweler without any emotion on Ennis' part at all. She'd worn a brooch he'd given her precisely once.

A surge of bile made her wince. How *could* she have done it?

She pushed the thought away and stood while Harriet pinned her hat on her head. One did what one had to do to survive.

She and Harriet had survived. That was all that mattered.

"Harriet, what name did the messenger use? How did he ask for me?" Ennis glanced at her companion.

"He asked for Mistress Wilson." She stepped back, twitched the netting, then nodded. "That'll do."

"Hmm." Ennis wrinkled her nose. "So there's still a chance."

"A chance for what?"

"A chance that Sir Henry is hunting for information. He may not be *sure* who I am. I know I would have seen him or at the very least heard of his presence in Beaulieu had

he arrived before this." She pursed her lips. "He's not one to keep his light under a bushel. He'd have been throwing his weight around at the inn, or bragging about an invitation to Montfort Abbey."

"The Montforts are away on the continent."

"I know. Thank heavens." Ennis sighed. "All right. There's nothing to be gained by postponing the inevitable. I shall go and see Sir Henry."

She walked from the room, gathering her reticule and pelisse as she left. "Oh, one thing, Harriet. If—if by any chance Colonel Chambers comes here looking for me this morning..."

In spite of her resolve to be calm, Ennis knew color was washing her cheeks. She fought for composure. "If he should ask, would you tell him I'll be back later?"

Harriet nodded. "Of course."

Her voice had an odd tone to it, but Ennis knew she could not wait to find out why. She had an appointment with a man she detested who could destroy her new life. And it couldn't be put off any longer.

"Look, maybe I should go with you." Harriet reached for her cloak.

"No." Ennis was firm. "No, I must do this alone. No simple countrywoman would bring a companion, especially not a widow. I have to present myself as what I am now. And besides..." She paused. "I need you here in case..." Her voice trailed off.

"Like that, is it?" Harriet knew exactly what Ennis meant. They'd been together for too long for it to be otherwise.

"Yes. It's important that you be here when he arrives. He will come, Harriet. I know he'll come. I don't want him to think I just vanished again. Not this time."

Harriet nodded. "Very well. You know best. And it's only five minutes or so from here, so I'll be expecting you back soon. If there's a problem..." She looked worried.

"There won't be. I'll be fine."

Ennis moved to the door where a patient soldier had idled away the time it took her to get ready. Impulsively she turned and hugged Harriet. "I *will* be fine. Really."

Harriet hugged her back. "I hope so."

The soldier touched his forelock as Ennis stepped from the cottage. "Ma'am."

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Private. I wasn't expecting a summons quite so early in the morning. It took me a little time to dress." Ennis kept her voice low and her veil pulled down over her face. Clouds scudded over the sun, casting sharp shadows, and there was a cool breeze blowing in from the ocean.

"That's all right, ma'am. But I expect Sir Henry will be wondering where you are. Let's be off, shall we? Don't like to keep him waiting too long."

Courteously he waved his hand down the lane and Ennis nodded. "Very well. By all means let's not keep Sir Henry waiting."

With her spine straight and her gaze downcast, the slender figure of *Mistress Wilson* walked alongside her uniformed escort. Beneath the sober bodice, however, Ennis Cranborne's heart was thudding nervously and inside her gloves her palms were damp.

At the back of her mind, someplace where only she could touch it, was the knowledge that Rogue Chambers had promised to come to her today. It comforted and sustained her over the walk to the Regimental Headquarters building.

It kept her chin high as she stepped over the threshold into the stuffy office created from an empty shop for the convenience of His Majesty's Government officials.

And it kept her company when she was shown into an even smaller room, bare of everything but a rickety chair and an old table and told to wait. She clung to it as the door slammed shut behind her.

Even the memory of Rogue wasn't enough to stop the shivers from building as she sat in the chair and waited.

And waited...

* * * * *

Rogue's horse was beginning to lather at the mouth when he finally clattered his way to Larkspur Cottage. More time had passed with Marcus than he'd anticipated and he'd spurred his mount on the way to Beaulieu, wishing the distance was shorter or that the beast had wings.

He hoped she'd waited. He prayed she was at home. He was half hard, anxious, desperate to see her again and to look into her eyes as they talked.

And talk they would. With any luck they could be naked while they did, but conversation was definitely on Rogue's agenda. Among other things. He bit back a groan as he swung from the saddle, barely avoiding damaging some important equipment with the maneuver.

The door rattled as he knocked impatiently.

Within seconds it swung wide to reveal the worried face of an older woman. "Yes? May I help you?" Her eyes darted down the lane as if she was looking for someone.

"I'm Chambers. Rogue Chambers. I'm here to see..." He paused. "I'm here to see Lady Ennis."

The woman sagged a little. "Oh thank God. Miss Ennis told me you might be coming. She's not here, sir."

Rogue blinked. "Not here? You're...Harriet, right?" Thank God he'd remembered her name.

"Yes. I'm Harriet. And no, she's not here. This morning there was a messenger come to take her away and she's been gone a couple of hours now." Harriet bit her lip and waved her hand worriedly. "She should've been back by this time. I'm afraid something's wrong."

Rogue reached for the hand and covered it with his own. "Tell me where she went? Let me find out what's happening?" He felt Harriet's hand tremble. "Who took her?"

Harriet swallowed and straightened a little. "A soldier. Said he was sent to summon Miss Ennis to Regimental Headquarters."

Rogue frowned. "I don't understand. Why on earth would anybody at Headquarters want to see Ennis?"

"It wasn't just anybody, sir. It was *Sir Henry Fowler*." Harriet's voice dropped and Rogue leaned forward to catch the words.

"Damn it all to hell." He couldn't stop the curse. "Sorry."

"Don't be. I've said much the same. And worse over the last few hours." Harriet withdrew her hand. "You know about him, then." Her gaze met his.

Rogue stared back steadily. "Yes. I know him. I know it *all*, Harriet. Everything that Ennis was — is — and what I intend that she'll be *in our future*."

Silence fell, broken by the twittering of birds and a few sounds from the road at the end of the lane. Harriet studied him intently, then nodded and drew in a deep breath. "Very well. Good. That's reassuring, sir."

Rogue let a quick grin curve his lips. "I'm glad we have your approval. Now all I have to do is convince Lady Ennis. And find out what sort of a mess she's gotten herself into with Sir Henry Bloody Fowler." He winced. "Sorry again."

"Please go and find her, Colonel Chambers. I'm worried."

"I know." Rogue turned from the door. "I'll have her out of there in no time." He reached for the reins of his horse and swung back into the saddle. "Harriet — you might want to start packing. You and Lady Ennis will be traveling soon."

"We will?"

"Yes you will." Rogue hooked his boots in the stirrups.

"Where?"

"Ireland."

Harriet blinked. Then a smile softened her features. "How lovely. I've always wanted to see Ireland."

Rogue waved and turned his horse for the main road. He was two minutes from Ennis.

Unfortunately, he was also two minutes from Sir Henry Fowler. And what the hell that man thought he was doing summoning Rogue's woman – well, if he had to sort it out at the point of a sword, he'd do so. Quite happily.

That bloodthirsty thought remained uppermost in his mind as he covered the short distance from Larkspur Cottage to Regimental Headquarters. Within minutes he was striding into the cramped storefront and glaring at the private manning the desk. "I'm looking for a lady who was brought in here this morning."

The lad gulped. "Yes sir."

"Yes sir *what*? Where is she?"

"Umm..." He struggled for words, his Adam's apple bobbing nervously. "She's...uhh..."

"She's *what*, man? Spit it out. I don't have all day."

The soldier gestured with his head. "She's back there, sir. Just went in to see Sir Henry."

"*Just went in*?" Rogue leaned on the table menacingly. "She's been here for two hours."

"Yes. Er – well –" The chair backed up on the floor as Rogue tried not to gnash his teeth in anger. "Sir Henry was busy this morning, sir. He had us put her in a room in the back."

"A room *in the back*?" Again Rogue parroted the young man's words, this time with the force of his years in the military behind them. "You forget I know this building. You put that woman in a *cell*?"

The soldier knew wrath when he saw it and promptly surrendered, doing the verbal equivalent of waving a white flag. "'T'weren't my fault, sir. Honest, sir. Only following orders, sir. Treat the lady nice, they said, but put her in the room in the back

'til Sir Henry's ready for her. Really, sir. Them was my orders." Sweat beaded on his forehead. "I asked her if she'd like a cup of tea, sir. Weren't nothing disrespectful goin' on..."

Rogue snarled an acknowledgement. He was thoroughly furious now and concerned about Ennis. "Is Sir Henry in the Commander's office?" Rogue couldn't imagine where else he might be. God forbid *he* use one of the little storerooms they'd converted to jail cells for the occasional detention of wrongdoers.

"Yes sir. Commander's out on surveillance today."

Rogue's eyes gleamed. "Good." He spun on his heel and headed toward the appropriate door.

"Sir? Sir, you didn't ought to go in there without —"

"I'll introduce myself." He took pity on the youngster. "I outrank you, lad. Nothing will come of it as far as you're concerned."

"Thank you, sir. Yes, sir. If you're sure, sir..." Uncomfortably, the private looked around. "Perhaps I'll just go and — and — see to something, then sir."

"Good idea. Take your time."

Rogue reached the Commander's door and turned the knob, thrusting the heavy wood aside and walking in without ceremony.

His gaze flew to Ennis, sitting—calm and unflustered—on a very uncomfortable-looking chair in front of a desk. Behind it was the puffed-up form of Sir Henry Fowler.

Rogue barely even noticed. His thoughts and his attention were all for Ennis. He moved to her side and rested a hand on her shoulder, making her turn her head and look up at him through her veil.

"Darling, I've found you. I was so worried when Harriet told me you'd not returned." He squeezed her shoulder, a tiny signal for her to relax and keep her countenance.

Bless her, she did. "I'm so glad you saw Harriet." There was the merest tremor in her voice. Few would have noticed it, but few were as attuned to her as Rogue. He noticed. He didn't like it.

"Sir Henry." Straightening his shoulders, Rogue turned coldly to the man behind the desk who had half risen on Rogue's sudden entrance. "I should very much like to know why you have summoned my future wife into your presence."

Sir Henry dropped back into his chair with something approaching a plop. *Only to be expected when an arse like him meets hard wood.* Rogue wondered if seeing Ennis again was making him giddy, since that was an inappropriate thought for the current circumstances.

"Your future wife?" Sir Henry's eyes darted from one to the other. "You jest, Colonel Chambers." His mouth puckered. "This...this woman is little more than a—"

Rogue's gut clenched with fury. "Watch your next words, man. This woman is not only my future wife, but she is also *Lady Ennis Cranborne*, only daughter of the late Duke of Cranborne. Insult her and I shall be *more* than happy to act on her behalf."

Chapter Six

Ennis barely managed to keep from jumping at Rogue's words.

He knew. He knew everything.

How he'd put it all together, fathomed her deepest secrets, she had no idea. But in some ways it was a relief that he had. Now at least she didn't have to look into his eyes as she told him herself.

She stayed still by sheer force of will, Rogue's hand burning through the fabric of her clothing where it rested on her shoulder.

Sir Henry looked aghast. "What? What's this? You jest, Chambers. And a poor jest it is too." His eyes flickered from Rogue's face to hers, squinting as if he would see through the veil, past the picture she presented and into the woman beneath.

He would never accomplish that task. Only Rogue had managed it. Only Rogue ever could.

Rogue's fingers twitched. "No jest, Sir Henry. Lady Ennis and I are betrothed. I don't know why you had her brought here, but I have to say I'm extremely upset by your actions."

"She's...she's..." The older man blustered, pointing at Ennis. "She's *not* a lady."

"You foul—"

Rogue started forward, but Ennis rose and barred his way. It was time to end this foolishness, get out of Sir Henry's disgusting presence and leave with Rogue. What would happen next was anybody's guess, but for right now, Ennis needed to defuse a potentially dangerous situation and separate these two men before they were on each other like fighting cocks.

She cared not one whit for Henry Fowler's welfare. But she wanted Rogue hale, hearty and in one piece. Until she could render him insensate once again.

Fowler stared at the smile she knew was visible beneath her thick veil. Just the thought of rendering Rogue limp made her happy. It made all of her warm, various parts of her damp and if the man behind the desk cared to look down a little he'd probably see her nipples were hard too.

Fortunately, that observation seemed to escape him.

"Gentlemen, please." Ennis spoke firmly, addressing Sir Henry, but keeping one hand wrapped around Rogue's arm. "That will be quite enough."

When Rogue would have pulled free, she gripped him harder and shook him. "I *said* that will be enough. *Darling.*" The endearment dropped easily from her lips and distracted Rogue's attention back to her.

His gaze narrowed dangerously, a glitter of temper lighting the back of his eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Very sure." She stroked his arm, soothing him. "There's naught to be gained by anger. I'm sure there's been some mistake." Ennis looked at Fowler. "Perhaps you mistook me for another, Sir Henry. 'Tis not an uncommon error."

Fowler was silent, a pucker of distaste creasing his lips.

"And you, my love. There's nothing to be upset about. Other than a rather long wait in a small room, I have been well treated. A nice young man offered me tea."

"So you're the Cranborne brat, are you?" Fowler found his voice again. "Everyone wondered what happened to you."

Ennis rolled her eyes as once again she had to grip Rogue to stop him from reaching for the idiot who couldn't keep his mouth shut. She managed a chuckle. "I think that's a little too flattering, Sir Henry. I very much doubt whether my life was of interest to anyone. Certainly not after my father...passed away." She could not help the hesitation

in her words. Even now, after all these years, the circumstances of her father's death—well, she'd be living with them forever, most probably.

"Well, it explains a lot." Fowler leaned back.

"Such *as*?" Rogue's tone was unsheathed steel and cut through the tranquility Ennis had been doing her best to create.

Damn the man. Damn both of them. This wasn't the time to engage in a test of either's masculinity.

However, Fowler wasn't totally unaware of Rogue's sentiments, or his taut body, poised to spring. He finally opted for discretion, bringing a sigh of relief to Ennis' throat.

"I suppose there may have been some mistake. I shall look into it. My apologies...*Lady Cranborne.*" He lifted the corner of his lip contemptuously.

Sadly, Ennis' relief was short-lived.

"It explains why you two are betrothed." Even now, with Rogue glaring at him from the short distance across his desk, Fowler couldn't keep the edge of maliciousness out of his words. "A rake and a —"

"A *what*?" Rogue finally tore himself free as Ennis barely kept herself from throwing her hands in the air and leaving them both to it.

"Never mind." Sir Henry's chair grated on the floor as he pushed it back, away from Rogue's lunging body. "Forget I said anything. You may leave."

He waved his hand in a gesture of dismissal, but not before Ennis had noted the slight tremor. She'd have been quaking in her boots if Rogue ever faced her down like that.

"Good." Rogue pulled back and turned to Ennis. "Come, my love. We have a lot to do today."

"You're well suited. The pair of you." Sir Henry's sour words followed them, but surprisingly Rogue laughed.

"That's the first sensible thing you've said today." He tossed the words over his shoulder and rushed Ennis from the building, past the empty desk at the front and out into the sunshine. "And it'll probably be the only sensible thing he says today too."

He turned, a smile lighting his features. "Hullo, darling. Oh, by the way, you're going to marry me, you know."

Ennis gulped.

"I am?"

"Of course."

She stared at him, fighting the urge to reach for him and pull his head down to hers. "Aren't you supposed to go down on one knee or something?"

His grin turned wicked. "If I went down on my knee in front of you, I'd be tempted to do something while I was there that would shock Beaulieu to its core."

Ennis, not misunderstanding him, blushed. "Umm."

"Come on."

He urged her to his horse and before she knew it, she was in the saddle.

"Let's go somewhere quiet so that we can finish this conversation." He swung up behind her as she arranged her skirts. "Just hang on for a little while. I know a good place."

"But – Harriet – she'll be worried –"

"Harriet's busy. Don't concern yourself. She knows what's happening."

Ennis fidgeted. "Well, that's more than I do." She gripped Rogue's forearms as he turned the horse and headed out of Beaulieu to the heath beyond.

"Patience my love." A soft kiss brushed the nape of her neck beneath her coiled hair. "And you can take off that damned hat too."

"Well, perhaps I will, but not at this moment. This is outrageous enough, Rogue. Suppose somebody sees us like this? Me on your horse, you –"

"Holding you in my arms? Who cares?"

Ennis sighed with pleasure and leaned back against him. "You do like to live up to your name, don't you?"

"Yes."

She felt his chest rumble with a laugh. "Where are we going?"

"Somewhere I can get you naked. And we can talk."

"Talk?" Ennis pondered that, knowing she was aroused at his words.

"And other things." He knew where he was going, since he turned his horse firmly and before Ennis knew it, they were deep in a small glade, well off the road that cut through the heather and the gorse of Beaulieu Heath.

"Now." Rogue slid from behind her, tethered the reins and reached for her waist. "Come here, love. I can't wait any longer. I'm desperate."

She fell into his arms and his kiss, lips meeting with an eagerness that could not be denied. Ennis was desperate too. It surprised her, the ferocity of this need pouring through her body.

There was no surprise in the fact that while mouths devoured, hands worked frantically, stripping clothes, unpinning hair, taking them both to the impromptu bed they'd fashioned in the sun-dappled shadows around them.

"God, Ennis." Rogue stroked her breasts then kissed them, teasing each nipple to a puckered bud.

"Rogue, oh my Rogue..." Ennis pulled at his shoulders, wriggling and tugging, anxious to feel him between her thighs, where he belonged.

"I know." He settled in exactly the right place then lifted her, pulling her pussy to his mouth and breathing her in. "I have lived with the scent of you. Remembered it. Remembered your taste, the way you get so wet for me." He dipped his head and licked her, making her cry out with delight. "So good. Everything I've remembered and more."

"Make me come with you, Rogue. I want you inside me. I want your cock inside me."

She was lost, drowning in the caress of the air against her naked skin, the way the sunlight turned Rogue's hair to burning embers. Gone was her past, gone was the unpleasantness of the morning and gone was Sir Henry Fowler. She'd forgotten everything and everyone but this moment, these seconds before he claimed her and made the world right once more.

"I want that too." Rogue lowered her hips and rose above her. "I want it more than I want air to breathe or water to drink. I could live on you – in you –"

He touched her, the head of his cock pushing between the swollen folds of her pussy and into the welcoming heat of her cunt. She could feel him, a wonderful stretching and filling of places that were empty and desolate without him.

"Yessss..." Ennis arched her spine, letting her thighs fall apart, taking all of him, offering him everything she had, everything she was.

And when he began to move, she met him, answering every thrust with one of her own, every groan with a matching sound, every pause with a tightening of the muscles within her body.

They rode as one, their destination shared, their pleasure magnified, their release an instant where they left the world behind and journeyed into a void of blinding sensation.

Both of them cried out at the identical moment.

It was a simple act, one that had been repeated for uncounted thousands of years by untold millions of lovers. And yet, to Ennis, it was almost as if she'd discovered something unique. Something special.

As she eased and Rogue slid free of her body, she realized that indeed she had. It was the *first time* she'd lain with a man she *loved*.

Consequent to that thought came another. There would be no one else between her thighs for as long as she lived. There hadn't been since the first time they'd done this. Now, at last, Ennis knew why.

"So, Lady Ennis." Rogue lifted one arm and rested his head on his hand, looking down at her. "We must talk."

Rogue placed his hand on the curve of her belly and looked at it as if admiring the contrast between his tanned fingers and her white skin.

"There is little to say. You know it all." Ennis sighed. "I am indeed a Cranborne." She wrinkled her nose. "Not to put too fine a point on it, I am the daughter of a dissolute drunkard who gambled away a fortune, cheated his fellows and lied about it, only to put a period to his existence with a pistol in the room of a prostitute." She shrugged. "'Tis rumored he never paid the poor woman, either."

"That's him. Not you."

She shifted a little, turning her head to meet his gaze. "I was on my way home from boarding school when it happened. He'd arranged a marriage for me, which naturally was called off. Since there were settlements and titles involved, you can be sure the young man's family immediately ensured that one such as I couldn't taint the family line."

"It didn't have a damn thing to do with you, Ennis. You know that." Rogue frowned, idly tapping his fingers around her navel.

"Oh, I knew that." She wriggled. "Stop that, it tickles and you're distracting me."

Rogue dropped a quick kiss on the nearest available breast. "Go on."

"The Cranborne estates—what Father had left, that was—were mortgaged to the hilt, as they say. Everything was sold to meet the outstanding debts. I—I escaped it all, thank God, with Harriet's help. She took me to her sister's, in London. From there...well, you know the rest."

"La Diamanté was born?"

"No choice, I'm afraid. I would not walk the streets, but I had to make a living. Harriet wouldn't leave me and her sister was not well. We were desperate, Rogue." She turned to him, touching his cheek. "Truly desperate. I had no other choice."

"Hush, love. I know. I only have to look into your eyes to know."

Ennis smiled, in spite of the pricking behind her eyes. He understood, this amazing man lying naked and relaxed beside her. Miracles did happen occasionally.

She wanted to finish her story. "We pooled everything we had, Harriet helped me fashion an evening gown that was – well, different to everyone else's – and we took the final gamble of going to Drury Lane at the height of the Season."

"And you were a success, of course."

"I was lucky. And I was a new face. Before long, I had several callers and so...yes, La Diamanté became a reality." She stared at him. "But then there was one night, one man – and I knew it had to end."

He grinned. "Me."

"Well, you could look a bit more impressed and not quite so self-satisfied." She poked him in the chest as he laughed.

"I am satisfied. For the moment. I've found you, the sun is shining, you're naked and we've fucked. Once. I think I might want to do it again soon, so keep that in mind."

She nodded. "All right. But –"

Rogue grimaced. "There's always a *but*, isn't there?"

"But how can you think about marrying me? I'm a disgraced woman, Rogue. I carry a tainted name and more than my share of scandal –"

He silenced her quite simply – by kissing her. Then he raised his head a mere inch or two from hers. "Shut up."

"Mmmfff..."

Rogue kissed her again. *Deeply*. And of course, one thing led to another...

It was several hours before a disheveled Lady Ennis Cranborne and her equally disheveled betrothed, Colonel Rogue Chambers, returned to the quiet of Larkspur Cottage. They promptly informed Harriet that they would be traveling to the Chambers estates in Ireland.

There would be a wedding at the earliest possible moment then they'd all leave England and its memories—both pleasant and unpleasant—behind. In the quiet of the Irish countryside there would be a new future and nothing to encumber them from their past. The Irish didn't much care what the English Ton got up to, as long as it didn't involve them.

Harriet smiled and nodded then quoted her favorite playwright.

"Well, I suppose *all's well that ends well*, then."

Rogue stared down at Ennis with a lifetime of love in his eyes. "Yes indeed, Harriet. Yes indeed."

About the Author

Sahara Kelly was transplanted from old England to New England, where she now lives with her husband and teenage son. Making the transition from her historical regency novels to Romantica™ has been surprisingly easy, and now Sahara can't imagine writing anything else. She is dedicated to the premise that everybody should have fantasies.

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

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