

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT

DECEIVED BY
Desire

LARISSA LYONS

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Deceived by Desire

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Larissa Lyons

Dedication

To Laney ~ an adorably cheerful young woman I met only one time...because her husband shot and killed her two weeks later.

Please, if you're in an abusive relationship or know someone who is, ask for help. No woman — or man — should ever live in fear.

Prologue

The Wakeful Wake

Mum always said she was cursed, Grandmum insisted she was blessed.

Bah! Curses or blessings.

Didn't matter a whit as far as Laney was concerned. Either way, here she was again, hovering over countless mourners, sniffing food she couldn't eat and doing her best not to notice the rigid body on the floor. The dead body.

Laney hated the tradition of laying out the deceased. Whose grand idea was that?

Granted, the female gone to Kingdom Come appeared to be attired in her spruced-up Sunday best, but the skin of her ungloved hand was that creepy gray color, the shade that made Laney want to retch. She'd seen enough death.

Oh Lord, how she hated these funeral visions. Although to be precise, this one was a wake, not a funeral, but a lifeless body was still...well, *dead*.

No matter how many times she thought the word or avoided looking directly at the corpse, the situation didn't change. There would be no reprieve until she learned what she needed to—even though she had absolutely no idea what that was.

The knowledge would come to her eventually. It always did.

Laney told herself to relax, to allow whatever information the cosmos intended to reveal to reach her awareness. She knew from experience she'd recall the necessary details later.

When she woke up.

Being a "visionary"—her grandmum's term for it—was often the veriest of nuisances. Laney's mum had called a turnip a turnip, telling Laney from the time she was born until the time she died—Mum that is, not Laney—that Laney was cursed with the evil eye and only the devil's spawn could know the future.

Well, the night Laney dreamt of her mum's passing two days before it happened had proven rather...*visionary*, now hadn't it?

Enough piddling Eleanor Catherine Buckley—Catherine because Mum had hoped she'd aspire to greatness—her inner voice said, calling Laney back to the present...um, the *vision*.

Black-clothed mourners milled about the stuffy room, all talking in hushed voices, all circling the pallid body laid out on an unhinged door in the middle of the floor.

Poor soul. Couldn't they at least have elevated the door by propping it on some chairs or blocks and raised the deceased off the dusty floor?

Laney drifted above the people gathered round, their muted conversations nothing but indecipherable murmurings until two of the mourners caught her attention, their words easily reaching her among all of the others.

"Pitiful, dying so young. Told her something of this sort would happen, I did," the whale of a woman wailed, bringing her handkerchief up to dab at her eyes.

"Should've left 'im when she 'ad the chance," the tall female beside her confided with a confident nod then ruined it with a tearful, watery sniff. "She whispered to me once she almost 'ad, before they wed. 'Pon my word, 'tis tragic, so tragic!"

"Ain't that the truth? And her with child again, so soon after her first one died. Broke her heart, it did, that tiny babe dying before it was ever born. I suppose it somehow had an inkling the circumstances weren't ideal."

Then their voices faded and the host of indistinct murmurings and mutterings came at Laney from all directions. Eventually she deciphered heartfelt sympathies battling with scandalous whispers. The comments were being bandied about between several women in the corner. Curiosity drawing her, Laney abandoned the grief-stricken duo and glided closer to the small group, her nose wrinkling at the unpalatable scents emanating from this section of the room.

"That's what did her in, I'm convinced of it—the sorrow of losing her babe."

"Oh? I thought it was the fall. Shattered her spine, my Simon told me."

"Fall?" a third woman broke in. One with the worst garlic breath Laney had ever smelled. She rose clear to the ceiling, hoping to distance herself, but she could still hear every harsh word clearly, could still smell every clove unmistakably. "Well, I heard she *jumped*."

"Jumped?"

One of them *hrrumped*.

"If that's the way of things, we undoubtedly won't be arranging a *proper* burial for her. The good folks populating *this* God-fearing community won't tolerate an evil one such as *her* residing in consecrated ground. I won't *stand* for it, I tell you."

The others were quick to agree. "Certainly not. If she took her own life, she doesn't deserve our pity. And to think, I brought our Sunday ham! What a waste."

"Jumped? She'll burn in hell for that, you know." Simon's wife had changed her tune. "Burn in hell."

"Likely already there," Garlic Breath said with utter conviction.

Gracious. Gossiping biddies, weren't they? And how long must she listen to their pointless blathering until learning the point of this vision?

Laney wanted to pinch her nose shut against the stench. Sweet breads, decaying flesh and all that. Garlic. Too many unwashed bodies—the live ones—crowded into the small room didn't help either.

Why was it she could see, hear and *smell* in her visions?

Didn't seem fair, did it?

Not when she couldn't eat too. The tables laid out along one wall were burgeoning with a selection of treats unlike any she'd seen since...well, in forever. If she'd been awake, her stomach would have growled loud enough to summon the dead.

Oh heavens. She really had to quit doing that! Joking about the dearly departed. *She'd* be the one burning in hell if she kept that up.

With one last salivary glance at the aromatic baked goods—easily discounting the ham—and knowing it was useless to slaver over what she couldn't touch, much less consume, Laney went about the business of discovering why she was being shown this particular vision.

Grandmum had taught her they all had a purpose and that it was up to Laney to discover exactly what that was and what to do about it.

Like the time she'd seen the Schubert's youngest two dying of typhus and had been able to tell their mother before the first symptoms ever appeared. Or when ole Hank Roskins' horse had come up lame the very day his wife started having her birthing pains—and them seven miles from town! Laney never had been able to explain to Doc Collins how she'd known Mrs. Roskins was trying to birth a babe that was turned all backward weeks before she was due.

Stop stalling! her mind screamed. She'd never come by any answers—or rest—if she didn't muster the gumption to see which of the mourners she was here to recognize. And why.

Though she did have a propensity to jabber, if even mentally, and procrastinate whenever a task discomfited her. But why wouldn't she be ill at ease? She doubted *other* young women had to deal with moaning mourners and creepy cadavers when they were gone to the land of nod until the roosters crowed the next morn.

Ponder tomorrow, she could almost hear her late grandmum advising, *gather the particulars when they're given. It's a blessing, dearie, a blessing.*

A bloomin', blightin' blessing Laney was starting to wish she'd never been cursed, uh, *born* with.

Thoughts of her grandmother giving her strength, Laney bit the inside of her cheek and firmly tore her gaze from the platters of food—she'd abandoned her previous attempt the moment she noticed the honey cakes dripping in butter on one end of the table—and finally looked directly at the crowd. She focused on a face.

Nothing. No recognition, no sudden flash of insight.

She focused on the next one.

Still nothing.

Face after face crystallized before her and not once did she recognize a single person or see anything that looked familiar.

Hmm. Maybe this vision wasn't meant for her. Perhaps some guardian angels had gotten their wings crossed or something. Wishful thinking on her part, but maybe—for

once—she really wasn't meant to learn anything. But if that was the case, why wasn't she sleeping instead of—

A commotion at the door snagged her attention. Laney floated over to investigate and immediately wished she hadn't.

Because every bit of air in the room was sucked out, leaving Laney gasping for breath. For standing right in front of her, well, *below* her actually, but still exceedingly too close for comfort, was Reginald.

Reginald Tate. Staggering drunk—as if that were a surprise—lurching through the door, bottle in hand.

Even looking haggard and two, maybe three, years older than he was now, visibly anguished about the poor creature who lay stiff as a board, dead as a doornail on the floor—oh, her wicked sense of humor would surely cause her to go up in flames—she still hated him.

Hated the sorry bloke so much she wished she could wake up and cheer—that he was mourning someone, feeling grief. The bastard. Tricking her as he had, *pretending*...

Making *her* pretend.

He stumbled through the entryway and crashed to the floor, landing next to the gray body.

Laney flew as far away as she could and ended up suspended over the food-laden tables, refusing to acknowledge how her arm burned at the sight of him. How her heart shriveled at the thought of how much longer she must remain under his control.

Reginald cried out and dropped the bottle, which rolled away, amber liquid drizzling over the floor with every revolution. He scraped the tears off his cheeks and forced his arms under the stiff body that would soon be the diet of worms, tugging it upward.

The woman's head lolled to the side and snapped back, obviously broken, the bones in the neck useless. Shattering moans emanated from Reginald, long, low plaintive howls that shook the timbered ceiling above her. Amazing. If she didn't know better, she'd think he really cared. About a female, no less.

"Sorry! S-So sorreee!" He hiccupped. "Never meant for this..." His arms convulsed and he clutched the body tighter, cried louder.

And Laney thought she'd died and really had gone to hell because staring at her, eyes wide open, clearly in pain, enshrouded in a death mask—sunken and *gray*...

Was her own face.

Dead!

"Leave him while you're still able Eleanor Catherine. You haven't much time," the corpse mouthed silently then promptly vomited all over Reginald.

Laney screamed. And screamed. And screamed. Screamed so loud she finally woke up.

But despite how many deep breaths she took, how many candles she lit, or how many times her eyes roved over the beautifully appointed bedroom, Laney couldn't stop trembling or rid her heart of the fear. Or her nose of the stench.

Blighters!

They'd been *married*? She and *Reginald*? He'd gotten her with child?

Over her dead body!

Oh Lord.

If she couldn't fathom a way out of her current predicament, then the outcome was clear—*she'd* be the one feeding worms in unhallowed ground.

Chapter One

The Wretched Hat and the Wretched Man

Nash roused from his latest bout of self-pity long enough to crack open his eyes and watch the new passengers climb aboard the already cramped, soggy stagecoach and settle in directly across from the corner he'd occupied for the past several hours.

He shifted and pressed his foot solidly against the floor of the coach.

Demmed inconvenient it was, having to share the dank spot he'd staked out as his own with the outwardly perfect pair. He kept his head lowered in the guise of dozing and refused to admit, even to himself, that he'd cared enough to peek.

People. Who needed 'em?

Certainly not Nash Hammond. The stagecoach, on the other hand? Now that he needed, though if the blasted sky would just cooperate, not for much longer. He had enough money that he could buy his own horse—a damn fine one if he wanted. Hell, an entire stable full if he so desired and actually had a stable. But then he'd have to care for it. *Them*. No demmed matter!

It was easier to put up with public transport.

Gave him something to think about other than his own contemptible problems.

"Pardon me, sir, but your foot's snagged on my dress." The cultured voice cascaded over him like a heaven-sent waterfall, at odds with the jarring way she tried to wrench her long, surprisingly dry skirts from beneath his boot.

Nash refused to budge, kept his boot clamped down and continued to feign sleep as he'd been doing ever since the horses had splashed to a stop, the stagecoach rolling to a sodden halt behind them when the driver paused for a fresh team and additional passengers.

Experience had taught Nash that folks usually left a sleeping man alone, thinking he was drunk most likely, and would refrain from asking him to scoot over. That was the pertinent motivation—if he was going to be trapped inside, then Nash would make damn sure he had all the space he could muster. He always left a couple of extra inches between his body and the side of the coach, celebrating privately whenever he managed to secure more than the typical sixteen inches allotted to paying chumps like himself.

He'd begun his flight out of London as an outside passenger on the Royal Mail Coach—because it moved faster than lightning—but the incessant rains drove him inside and onto a public conveyance. Nash never could abide being exposed to the elements when it was pouring.

"Mister! My dress," the female hissed, trying in vain to arrange herself across from him. "It's caught under your boot!"

She pulled harder and he glanced at her through slitted lids, but the frilly contraption perched precariously atop her head completely hid her face.

Did she know that he'd stepped on her trailing hem on purpose?

Could she tell he was fighting back a smirk at her pathetically puny efforts to free her skirts? Did she have any idea of his pathetically useless existence?

Just as Nash tensed the muscles in his thigh to lift his foot, a ripping sound exploded from the floor and she plopped backward on the opposite bench, her skirts flying up to expose surprisingly dainty undergarments.

"Wretched man!" he heard her mutter under her breath.

Acting no better than an unlicked cub, he was amusing himself at her expense. He should apologize.

But he didn't move.

Or say a word.

He was too busy rumbling a fake snore or two and inspecting the luscious treat whose lacy hem remnants lay trapped beneath his sole, and the fop who'd just climbed in after her, lurching more than a bit in the process. The fop who she appeared to be wedded to, if the dandy's sour look toward Nash was anything to go by.

Figured.

Refined thing like that. Her in her fancy hat and frilly white traveling dress — white! As if she shouldn't be covered from head to toe with a thick layer of mud and grime. How she managed to look so pristine and proper on a day like today, with her apricot-colored kid slippers, closed ruffle-edge parasol that matched her dress to perfection and immaculately gloved fingers was beyond him.

Her generous bosom looked anything but refined though, ready to spill from the not-quite-decent neckline with just the slightest encouragement.

Nash strangled on the sudden growl of desire that threatened to erupt, turning it instead into a garbled snore.

Damn cock. Rearing up as if it needed a warm cunny, as though he hadn't attacked his brother's woman just hours before. Damn him! His penis deserved to be ground beneath *her* heel.

"All set, m'dear?" the red-haired dandy asked on a hiccup, squishing close to the woman and placing his arm proprietarily across her shoulders while he cast Nash a glower as if he could read minds.

Nash heard the slight hitch in her breathing, caught a hint of fear, just before she answered. "Indeed, Mr. Tate. Thank you for asking."

Her cultured tones had turned puny. From vibrant waterfall to watered-down dribble.

Nash hunched lower, slightly lifting his lids to gaze at her from beneath the overlong fall of hair that blocked half his face. Some sort of netting hung from the brim

of the ungodly confection perched atop her head, fully hiding her features. He could just make out the curve of her cheek, but that was it.

Probably had the face of a sow. God surely had to give such a one a curse to balance the bounty of figure He'd blessed her with.

The dandy patted his pocket, drawing Nash's attention. The man pulled out a snuffbox and made a great show of meticulously placing a pinch just inside his lower lip, which he ruined with another hiccup, then did everything in reverse, returning the snuff to his pocket. His actions were ludicrous, done with one hand as the other was still firmly ensconced atop the sow's shoulder.

Nash hadn't seen more flounces even at court. How the dandy could even talk with so much starched linen and lace at his throat was beyond him. The clunch likely spent more time at Weston's than he did his own dinner table.

And shuddering fear, and green-eyed jealousy! his conscience taunted, compliments of Mister William Shakespeare.

Jealous? Jealous of the overdressed man and his feminine fortune? *Never. Never!* As if hearing the mental shouts, the man echoed...

"Never fear, m'dear," Dandy drawled, "only three days confined in this infernal conveyance and we'll arrive at our destination."

She left off gazing at the torn hem fraying in her fingers and glanced through that damn netting at Dandy. "Won't you please bring yourself to tell me where we're going?" she inquired so softly if Nash's hearing hadn't been exceptional he would have missed it. At the dulcet sound, he realized he could never think of her as a sow again. Pig-faced or not, she had the voice of a princess. "I'm sure it won't ruin your surprise if you—"

"No! And leave off asking!" The dandy swatted her shoulder sharply. "You'll enjoy it," he added cajolingly. "I can assure you."

At the threatening undercurrent in the man's voice, Nash lifted his head and uncrossed his arms. He intentionally remained slouched, giving the appearance of only casual interest. "You're not taking the lady somewhere she doesn't want to go, are you?"

The woman flinched. Nash smelled her fear. It had grown stronger.

"Of course he isn't!" She trilled a practiced laugh. "Mr. Tate is forever treating me to new experiences and surprises."

"Mind your own bloody business!" the dandy bit out loudly.

"Here! Here!" an older man in the opposite corner grumped. "Females present and all that. Mind *your* mouth!"

"Forgive me," the redhead said urbanely, but Nash saw how his knuckles whitened on her shoulder. To the others, he was all polish and shine. Slime.

Nash wanted to lose his breakfast on the man's gleaming Hessians. Instead, he tried to see past the netting, clueless where his sudden bout of chivalry had sprung from. "Ma'am?"

He sensed her nervous smile, could almost taste how close to tears she was. "I'm wonderful. My life is...wonderful."

"See?" Dandy boasted, as if there had never been any doubt.

She was lying.

Nash cursed himself for caring. For even asking.

He didn't want the responsibility of sheltering a damn horse. What made him think he was up for the challenge of saving a bountiful-breasted, soft-voiced princess?

Sow, he told himself. A veiled sow. Oink.

Oink, oink! so cries a pig prepared to the spit. He intentionally butchered Shakespeare's original line, but couldn't stop from wondering...

Did lions eat pigs?

God. He couldn't wait until they halted for the night. There was only one cure for the fire now sparking along his cock and it sure as hell wasn't his hand.

* * * * *

Three days, maybe two, if the fucking rain didn't sink this coach as it had the first one they'd boarded.

Reginald curved his arm more securely around Eleanor's shoulder. He couldn't stay mad at her for more than a minute.

Damn but he was parched.

Thoughts of her always made his throat go dry. So why couldn't she make his dick go stiff?

Ever since the Unfortunate Incident when his brother George John arrived unexpectedly at Reginald's townhouse and caught him with Neils, his life hadn't been the same.

From the time they were in the nursery, Reginald knew he was different, knew with an inborn certainty that he should keep his sexual desires to himself, but even his sense of self-preservation couldn't stop him from finally expressing his inner yearning once he and Neils met. Lovers. They'd become lovers and Reginald had never been so happy.

Eleanor made the perfect foil—she attended all appropriate venues for a mistress and played her part well, keeping George John pacified and mollified.

Eh, eh. Reginald chuckled at his private jest.

Ironically, when it came to his older brother, no matter how much he positively loathed the man, Reginald secretly aspired to emulate him in every manner. George John was a true out-and-outer—the man boxed with Gentleman Jackson, rode with the Prince, and was a top-notch gambler and womanizer to boot. With his wife tucked

away in the country raising their three brats, two mistresses ensconced in London and reputations at more than one high-class brothel, George John was the epitome of the Regency Buck. And he had mistaken illusions that his younger brother was made of the same stamp.

When in fact, the only thing Reginald ever dreamed of bucking...was Neils.

Eleanor winced and he consciously relaxed his fingers, patting her shoulder. Leaning forward, he slid his tongue inside his bottom lip and gathered up the spit-soaked snuff. Hated the stuff. Just did it to look manly and because Eleanor had started clearing her throat and coughing every time he lit a cheroot these days—not that he could blame her on that score.

The fancy snuff tin had been the most recent gift from Neils and that alone made it worth using, though the constant reminder brought a pang of pain each time Reginald pulled it out.

Determined to put his past love affair and liaison behind him, Reginald spat the wad of tobacco on the lurching stagecoach floor. The brown blob slid toward the impertinent rogue in the corner.

Reginald straightened and smiled. He'd just shown the other man who was boss. Easily discounting the way the stranger's eyes narrowed, he leaned into Eleanor, knowing he couldn't make his claim any clearer.

He really didn't need to. He owned her. Body and soul.

Owned her. The knowledge didn't bring the comfort it usually did. Because from the moment George John discovered Reginald in his own home, in his own bedchamber no less, and in an extreme state of dishabille *with another man* and Eleanor nowhere in sight to mask his true actions, George John had made it his mission in life to "make Reginald into a real man" and "purge his soul of those detestable, perverted leanings".

Father would be appalled, Reginald had heard countless times. Usually followed by *A sodomite! In my goddamned family?* or *A Miss Molly—in the Tate family tree? Take care, Reg, the authorities don't get wind of this or you'll soon find yourself swinging from a branch!*

Blathering on and on, over and over, as if Reginald were to blame. If anyone was to blame, it was Eleanor.

At the thought, Reginald ground his teeth. If she'd been at home as she should've been, instead of flitting off to the sweet shop with her little friend, then she would've been there to salvage his reputation.

But oh no. She'd been gone, George John had found Neils *in* bed next to him and Reginald hadn't had a moment of solitude since.

"If that piece of pussy under your roof can't harden your cock, I'll break it off myself," George John had threatened. "You take that bitch, prove to yourself—and to me!—that you're a real man capable of siring a babe. Damn you, Reg! You *know* I've been in negotiations with Lord Volmering about his youngest chit. I expect you to do your duty and get her with child within a year of the nuptials."

Reginald had protested. But as always, it hadn't made a lick of difference. Evidently George John had his mind set on a connection with Lord Volmering—more decisively, a connection with Volmering's youngest's excessively large dowry entering into the Tate family coffers. Seatmates in the House of Lords ever since George John had unexpectedly inherited his title, they'd struck up a friendship three years and two babes late for George John himself to make the connection a reality.

So it was left to Reginald.

Left to Reginald to find a way to bed Eleanor and prove to both himself and his brother that he could do it.

Stupid fucking stipulation in the marriage contract, if you asked him, requiring him to father a child before the dowry changed hands.

The gin he'd downed earlier had gone right through him. He needed to piss. Knowing they wouldn't stop for hours only made his bladder burgeon. Too bad his newest beaver couldn't double as a chamber pot. Deuced hot in here with all of these muggy bodies in close proximity. Maybe he'd just sweat it out. But if that was going to be the case...

Reginald removed his fine beaver and set it in his lap, not wanting to soil the hat band with perspiration.

He squeezed Eleanor's shoulder, thinking of how his brother promised—had goddamn *guaranteed*—this trip would purge the “homophallic” urges—George John's term—right from Reginald's soul, cure him so that his cock would stiffen and spew each time he so much as *looked* at a woman.

Evidently, in addition to the mistresses and madams he knew in town, his brother had quite the collection of acquaintances with rather varied sexual tastes. At the thought of everything George John had hinted awaited him at the end of this journey, Reginald shuddered.

He just needed another drink. He'd get there. His cock would get there.

He had Eleanor. And his brother's friends to help him.

* * * * *

Heavens. The look on the stranger's face made her feel all twittery inside. On edge. Just like being with Reginald did, but in a not-quite horrible way. Almost a good way, for even though her stomach felt lodged in her throat and her skin buzzed at the fiery glint in his eyes, she couldn't look away.

Mayhap it was simply riding backward? Knowing the four horses and driver were just a meager distance away, barreling forward at a breakneck pace, certainly too fast for the inclement weather. But then, Reginald had insisted they both change clothes after the morning's coaching debacle and she'd just seen him tip the driver substantially to “Push on, man. Horses are strong, make 'em earn their hay.”

Thanks to Reginald and his ill-timed impatience, she was now stuck enduring not only the stranger's avid inspection, but the coach jiggling her body so ferociously it was stewing up the meager toast she'd eaten to break her fast. She'd known better than to indulge in her love of sweet breads, not when such an arduous, unknown journey awaited her.

No, Laney immediately reconsidered, the heat from the stranger's expression warming her straight down to her previously wet toes, it wasn't the public coach ride responsible for the feelings fluttering in her belly. It was *him*. The surly looking man whose knees were only scant inches from her own.

One would think the scowl on his face would do damage to his countenance, but on the contrary, his churlish expression combined with the daring lack of care he showed in his dress only piqued her interest further. His jacket wasn't properly buttoned and his neckcloth was tied so haphazardly she could see the hollow beneath his throat where his collar bones didn't quite touch. Absolutely scandalous!

Now if *he* owned her instead...

Laney groaned at her fanciful imaginings. Only one person owned her at the moment—for the next ten months, twenty-two days and some-odd hours—and that was Reginald Tate, the handsome...bastard next to her.

To distract herself, both from Reginald's smothering arm across her shoulders and the stranger's piercing gaze, Laney chanced a look at Reginald, confirming his attention was elsewhere, and left off tearing the torn hem to shreds to bring her reticule to her lap. She heard the comforting rustle of paper. Mary's letter. She'd read it again this evening, after they stopped for the night, see whether she could make heads or tails of her friend's uncharacteristically wild rambling.

Reginald patted her shoulder then removed his arm. Finally! She took a shaky breath but still felt smothered by his presence. Calling him *Reginald* in her mind was just one of a handful of defiant measures she'd undertaken lately to assert her independence, whether he knew it or not.

Why couldn't the cad have remained outside and ridden on top of the coach like a real man? The loud blast of thunder overhead mocked the question even as she thought it.

"I'll just enjoy another little nip, m'dear. I daresay it'll help the time pass." He scooted closer, branding her entire side, then pulled his ever-present flask from inside his coat pocket and tipped it back, pouring the contents down his gullet as if it were a race he had to win. At this rate, he'd be out before the next stop.

Would the stranger disembark there or remain on the coach? If that was his destination, would Reginald notice if she disembarked with him and never got back on?

Oh, the fanciful ideas running through her mind. The tingly quivers running through her abdomen...

Laney somehow found herself unraveling her torn hem again and trying not to notice the increased flutters in her stomach at the thought of intentionally putting

herself under the stranger's power. She should know better. She'd already put herself willingly under one man's control and that certainly hadn't improved her lot in life, now had it?

Reginald Tate...

The man she once thought the answer to her prayers. The man she now concentrated heaven-bound prayers on nightly, requesting Divine escape.

She'd been barely sixteen when the dashing Reginald Tate had begun frequenting Mrs. Michaels Millinery and Fine Accoutrements where Laney had been indentured shortly after she turned thirteen. After three solid years making hats and waiting on "ladies" who looked down their fashionably pale noses more often than not—and pricking her fingers with milliners needles, hatpins and bracing wire just as regularly—the flattering attention the handsome Mr. Tate showered on Laney practically made her swoon.

Two scant months after they met, he'd offered to buy her papers from Mrs. Michaels. Laney secretly suspected he wanted her for his "Lady of the Night" and other than being woefully uneducated in the art of nighttime activities, she was otherwise agreeable. Since losing her grandmum and mother within a few months of each other and being passed from one relative to another until winding up on the doorstep of an aunt who was already burdened with her own gaggle of children and certainly didn't want Laney, indenturing her at the first opportunity, Laney was nothing if not practical.

The allure of being pampered like a "lady"—even one bought and paid for—far surpassed the daily drudgery as the life of an unappreciated servant. At the time, her indenture to Mrs. Michaels was for another interminable four years, which to the young Laney was a veritable lifetime. The position offered by Reginald seemed a godsend.

Instead, the rotten Mr. Tate had only wanted her to *pretend* to be his amour while he'd dallied with those she'd often heard called "lower elements". Certain *men*—she could hardly think the thought without blushing, even now, half a year after Reginald had parted ways with his *male* paramour and renounced his *despicable, detestable acts*—Reginald's words, not hers—only to turn his immoral attention to her. Immoral because he didn't want her physically, but he kept trying to take her anyway.

Although in the last few moments, since being stuffed like kippers on a plate with the other passengers, Laney's mind swam with all manner of possibilities. What if she'd declined Reginald's offer and remained with Mrs. Michaels? Would she have, perhaps, crossed paths with the gentleman sitting across from her?

And should he even be termed "gentleman"?

Most assuredly not. Not with the way he went without a hat when everyone knew the importance of fine headwear. "Choose your hat first," Mrs. Michaels had always told her customers, "the rest of your ensemble will then magically follow."

And *not* with the way he brazenly persisted in staring at her so intently, his eyes glowing like orange embers, causing Laney to feel as if her veil hardly shielded her at all.

"Stop staring." The words were out of her mouth before she knew it.

Reginald had gone slack. He leaned heavily against her, indicating his slumber, and Laney supposed she'd unknowingly relaxed her guard as well. Relaxed too much, given her awareness of the man across from her and her hastily spoken command.

Judging by the increased heat in his gaze, he hadn't stopped contemplating her either.

Did no one else notice his unusual eyes? The way they fairly shimmered with heat?

"Remove your hat."

The lace slipped from her fingers. "I beg your pardon?"

He leaned forward and caught the scrap before it drifted to the ground. Their knees collided. "Take off your hat. You're the best view around and I want to see the rest of it."

"Shhh!" she sputtered, never more grateful for the shielding gold netting than she was at this very moment. She tried to angle her legs from his, but between Reginald's sleeping body weighing against her side and the stranger's knees pressed intimately against hers, she couldn't move. "Please. You mustn't say such things."

He gave Reginald's sleeping form a disdainful glance and leaned even closer. "Why do you fear him?"

How did he know? "*What?*"

"You heard me." He made a show of returning the torn hem to her gloved hands, giving hers a squeeze before releasing them. She felt the touch clear to her toes, which were locked between his heavily booted feet.

"I asked why you fear him." His rumbling voice had gone all low and smoky.

"I'm sure you're mistaken," Laney whispered, glancing at the other passengers. Everyone seemed intent upon passing the uncomfortable time as privately as possible, gazing out the windows or snoozing.

How was it no one took notice of anyone else? Least of all the intimate encounter between her and a stranger? Or how Reginald's head lolled about his neck with every jostling revolution of the coach's wheels? Laney couldn't miss how Reginald's jaw hung unattractively unhinged, his sour breath breezing over her shoulder. She had the sudden urge to upend the contents of his flask inside his mouth. Maybe he'd drown.

"You don't deny it." The firm statement drew her attention back to the ill-dressed man before her. The most unrigged gentleman she'd ever seen.

Gentleman? Gads! She had to quit thinking of him as such. He was nothing more than a shabbaroon. But one who so boldly demanded, "Remove your hat. I won't ask again and I want to see your face."

His tone made her think he'd be uncouth enough to rip it from her head if she refused to do as he bade. "You can't! I cannot. Oh, do please sit back."

She couldn't think with his knees touching hers, with his finger idly nudging her leg. Was this desire, then? This awful achy, nervous, *wonderful* feeling? The need to brush his hair back, to really see his face? The need to be *his*?

For the umpteenth time, Laney bemoaned her misspent youth and cursed her impatience. She hated Reginald and Mrs. Michaels all over again.

"How long have you been wed?"

His words startled her. "Wed? I assure you we're not!"

"Related?"

"Heavens no."

And just like that, he was gone. No more teasing fingers. No more obscene nuzzling of her kneecaps. No more glowing eyes.

"Ah," he murmured once he'd straightened and returned fully to his own seat. His expression was once again inscrutable, the playful, albeit intent, interest he'd shown moments before wiped free.

"And what, pray tell, does that mean?" She couldn't keep quiet. "*Ah*? You say that as if you're passing judgment. Aren't negative judgments reserved for those of clerical persuasions?"

If anything, he looked darker, more brooding. She heard him fairly growl from his shadowy corner. "You aren't bound to him, yet you choose to remain," he stated with obvious disdain. "Keep the blasted hat on, then. I no longer care what you look like."

Unaccountably, she cared that he no longer cared. Stupid, stupid. She should be jumping from the stagecoach and running as far away from Reginald as she could instead of bantering with a moody stranger.

"You don't understand," Laney hissed, incensed with herself. Why in the world should it matter whether he understood or not?

Nash turned away from the shrouded feminine mystery, dismissing her and pulling the thin volume of Shakespeare from his pocket. One could only feign sleep for so long. "I no longer have the inclination to understand. Keep your protestations and your fear to yourself, madam. What you choose to do with your life is of no interest to me."

It was a blatant lie, but Nash hoped if he said it enough, it would become the truth.

He had no business caring for anything, much less *anybody*, at the moment.

Damn her and infernal voice for tempting him to think otherwise.

For unlike his older brother who preferred hardened women, at least until Lady Francine came along, Nash himself had always lusted after innocence and purity. *Virgins*. From the moment he became cursed and realized his body was no longer his own, he fantasized about once-upon-a-times and happily-ever-afters, dreaming of ordinary men with ordinary wives living ordinary lives.

He dreamed of one day having a pure wife. An innocent. She didn't have to be a lady or even very beautiful, a simple refined peasant or even a clean servant—he wasn't

overly particular—would suit him fine. A woman who had saved herself just for him. *That* was what he truly desired.

But those were dreams—the two to three minutes of fantasy he allowed himself in the moments before full wakefulness intruded and reality crashed down around him. He couldn't take a virgin. He couldn't have a wife.

Or children, or a family of his own. He wouldn't have peace.

Not as long as he was a monster.

Who'd practically raped his brother's woman.

Feeling her irate attention still directed at him, Nash moved the curtain that was drawn against the rain and peered out of the coach, making a great show of gauging the location of the sun. Asinine, as it was blocked by storm clouds. "By my reckoning," he said as if to himself but intending that she should hear, "we'll arrive at our overnight stop in six and a half hours." He sighed wholeheartedly and sank back into his corner, letting the curtain drop. "Plenty of time to find myself a pretty wench for the evening, one who doesn't wear ugly hats. Or anything at all..."

"Wretched, wretched man!"

Good. He'd gotten to her. So why did he feel lower than the bottom of muddy pig's feet?

And why couldn't he rid himself of the unwanted concern mired in his chest?

Chapter Two

The Shocking Vision and the Shocking Request

A colony of sparrows whistled and chirped overhead, darting to and fro, the tiny specks soaring against the blue canopy. Centered in a verdant field, amidst grass a vibrant green, stood a single white gazebo. The birds chased each other through the immaculate woodwork, flying past the glossy paint as if pointing her attention to what was inside.

Through the slatted ceiling a mound of quilted blankets were visible, covering the floor. On the quilts, a circle of flowers adorning her head, dress hiked to her waist, her stockings being rolled down by the most attractive gentleman, Laney saw...*herself*!

Her thighs quivered beneath his touch. A cacophony of flapping wings set to in her stomach, the muscles in her quim clenched, waiting. Cream dripped from her center.

"You're going too slow, darling." Laney laughed, feeling more lighthearted than she could remember. "Though I cannot believe I'm letting you do this here!"

"It is well done, and fitting for a princess."

"Not that one again, you cad. Didn't the original speaker meet Old Mr. Grim after reciting that line?"

The gentleman tut-tutted, his broad fingers skimming over the exposed skin of her thighs, her calves, encircling her ankles. "Ah, but I have no intention of following in his footsteps. And what we're doing is exactly why I had this built, for where else would I be undressing the woman I love? There are far too many interruptions back at the manor."

Even as her pelvis shifted toward his questing fingers, Laney – the real Laney – felt her heart catch.

He loved her? She tried to see him better, but the bright sun glinting from overhead kept his face in shadows.

They lived in a *manor*?

"Interruptions?" she heard herself ask indulgently. "You dare call our adorable children interruptions?"

"When they keep me from savoring your body, I do."

Children?

He bent to nibble her thigh and Laney saw hair as dark as coal, overlong and falling against his cheeks. She raised her hand to brush it back but became distracted and instead grazed her fingertips over the well-maintained side-whiskers angling toward his jaw. The fine hair made her fingertips tingle.

"It's been ages since I've tasted you," he spoke hotly against her thighs.

And, oh my—the way he stared at her private flesh! Would that she could see his private parts too...

"Ages?" she heard herself protest. "Do you not recall yesterday when—"

"I've slept since then," he growled over her skin, setting off all manner of jittery sensations in her legs—and between them.

Why wasn't she embarrassed? Shouldn't she be mortified, positioned as she was? Undressed as she was becoming?

And how did she know that he was handsome? It wasn't as if she'd been granted a decent view yet. But oh, the things he could make her feel! How was it he seemed to know her body so intimately, sliding four fingers to her slit and parting the heated flesh to edge inside? Without so much as a *by your leave*?

The birds sang louder. The sun shone brighter.

Her body craved *deeper*. "Taste me now, my darlin' king. Please."

"Yes, Princess." And with an intoxicating wiggle of his fingers, he lowered his mouth to the apex of her thighs and inhaled. "You know I only wish to serve you."

"I know you only spout clankers when...you 'ave me...at your mercy..." Her words strangled on a gasp as his tongue replaced his fingers and he stared up at her, the intent look in his eyes stealing her breath.

Eyes that *glowed*.

* * * * *

Laney jerked upright.

Her cunny pulsed, rapid contractions that left her vaguely satisfied—yet craving more, *intensely* craving more.

The stage lumbered to a stop at a noisy inn. The birds in her mind were replaced with stomping horses, yelling coachmen and a multitude of people and chickens milling about. The rains had paused but thunder still boomed in the distance.

The driver jumped down and called for new horses then opened the door and let down the steps. "Privy break, folks. Be quick about it. We ride out in seven minutes, rain or shine."

Her heart thumped madly. The clenching in her pussy had deepened and slowed. Laney fought to remember. Had it been a dream? Or a vision?

What had happened to her elocution? She prided herself on always sounding like a lady, ever since learning how, and she'd dropped an *h*!

Blighters. He'd said he *loved* her. So it most certainly had to be a dream.

But if it *was* a vision... Perhaps the irritable stranger was the one to help her escape her current situation?

Reginald clambered down, the alcohol dulling motions. "Eleanor! Get out here, woman," he barked, standing by the door. "You've got my beaver."

"And that will never do," she muttered, and reluctantly followed.

When she reached the steps, she looked back.

Only to find those glowing, *knowing* eyes on her.

* * * * *

Damn. He smelled her desire.

What had she been dreaming of? And why the hell did he care?

Stupid woman. Staying with a dandified fop who scared her.

If she didn't have the gumption to leave a man she wasn't bound to, then it was beyond useless for Nash to give a tinker's damn.

He waited for everyone else to disembark, secured his book in his pocket then climbed out as well. Ignoring the mist that blanketed everything, Nash stalked away from the main building and past the stables with long strides that quickly ate up the distance over the wet ground. If he didn't stretch his legs, he'd roar his brains out. What he wouldn't give for a quick run through a field.

He hated being cooped up.

By a conveyance. A house. Or by people.

Didn't matter. They were all intolerable. As was his fascination with—

"Sir! Please wait!" Fascination interrupted.

Nash looked over his shoulder but didn't slow his pace. "Where's your drunken keeper?"

Why did he sound so bitter? Her choices were her own. It was no fur off his back if she chose to tie herself to such a man.

The veiled princess was nothing to him. Nothing. Less than nothing.

The lion doth protest too much, methinks, his damnable conscience misquoted.

She literally ran to catch up with him, sliding over the mucky ground. He finally halted just outside a thick copse of trees. Out of pity. Not interest.

"He's refilling...his flask...inside. Please...ah..."

The damn netting still hid her face, but regardless, he had to fight the urge to grab her hand and take off. Running through the forest and bringing her with him. Absurd.

"Ah, would..." It was taking her a moment to catch her breath, but more than that, he sensed her hesitation to speak.

To hell with it. "State your piece, madam. I wish a drink as well."

He didn't, but she didn't have to know that.

She twirled that flimsy parasol in her gloved hands, swallowed audibly and articulated quite plainly, "I know this is indelicate, but would you please consider purchasing me from Reginald?"

He coughed, positive now that the veiled princess had attics to let if she expected *him* to somehow save her. "*Buy* you?"

"My indenture. Mr. Tate owns me, well my services, for the next ten and a half months."

"That's less than a year. Why can you not just wait—"

She heaved a deep breath that only caused her bosom to swell. "It's imperative I alter my situation before then."

"*Imperative?*" he stressed, indicating how little he credited her claim. "And you expect me to buy you from him?" Surely his misbegotten existence couldn't become any worse. Here she was, playing at bo-peep, expecting him to be her magical fairy...godfather or some other similar drivel?

"Yes. Please, sir. If you would."

And she stood there, head cocked to the side, parasol atwirling, waiting.

A rush of wind and fresh rain pattered down around them. On top of them. And she didn't move. Nothing but that blasted spinning parasol.

Lord save him from frilly females. Who smelled of arousal.

He needed to fuck a wench then get drunk. Or maybe get drunk and fuck a wench. Either way suited him. *Then* he'd stop thinking foolish thoughts about princesses and setting up his own stable.

"No. I won't." Nash spun on his heel.

"Wait! Please!" she called after him, but he turned a deaf ear on her pleas, even when they became more frantic, and quickened his pace once again, sloshing his way back to the tavern.

"But, sir!" the cry trailed off then echoed again.

Hardening his heart to the sound of her disappointment, Nash loped through the yard, dodging the scurrying ostler and stable boys, barely missed kicking a chicken. Fowl creature. Matched his damn foul mood.

Bypassing several passengers who were already on their way out, heading back to the stage, Nash entered the tavern and shook off his person. Deuced rain.

Magnificent tits or not, the princess was obviously three horses shy of a team of four if she thought he was about to come to her aid with the first flick of her parasol.

Rescue her? When he hardly knew where he'd lay his head after the stagecoach reached its destination? Wasn't even sure where that might be, just that he'd escaped to France last year, Spain and Italy the two years before that and had decided to try Scotland for change. So he was heading north. North into the unknown.

Rescue her? Not bloody likely.

Paying not a dram of attention to anything but his own impossible feelings of regret, Nash sauntered up to the bar and plunked down two coins. Who said he needed to wait until tonight to start drinking? And since when did he develop a fascination for breasts? he'd like to know. Nash had always considered himself more of a bum and beard man, not one who salivated over diddeys he couldn't even see.

An arm suddenly went around his shoulders. "Barkeep, a shot of your finesht for my fellow traveler 'ere!"

Tate had turned up surprisingly nice, now hadn't he?

Nash couldn't believe he hadn't noticed the dandy standing – more like listing – at the bar. Distraction, thy name is Princess.

He hissed and extracted himself from the one-armed embrace. "Least we haven't gotten bogged down like those other two coaches we saw," he said by way of small talk. He could be polite when the occasion warranted it, just usually chose not to bother. "Dame Fortune must be on our side."

"Good fortune, eh?" Dandy replied, taking a healthy swig from the glass in front of him then pouring the remainder into his flask with hands that shook, sloshing some over the side.

Damn fine waste of damn fine liquor, Nash thought, savoring the first sip, surprised to find it wasn't watered down. He took another.

"'Fraid I haven't noticed any fortune," Tate said louder than necessary. "Not today. 'Specially not with all my attention focused elshwhere..." The last was a lewd slur and Nash suddenly felt the urge to wipe the fop's repellent touch off his shoulder. Repellent? If Nash were honest with himself, he'd admit a stab of jealousy over the flawless attire the other man wore. Simply because a certain female was apparently drawn to the man didn't give him cause to hate the fop on sight. But hate him he did.

"I've seen th' way you're lookin' at her, you know."

Tate had something Nash wanted. Ergo, he hated the man on principle. "Oh? Have you now?"

"Oh yessh," he affirmed in a sickening lilt. "Now don't go doin' anything foolish, my good man. I'd hate to be forced to challenge you to a duel."

Nash saluted the fuddled fribble with his glass, bared his teeth in a grimace that he hoped passed for a smile and offered, "Now I could go and take that as an insult or I could ask you to define 'foolish', just to make sure we understand each other. But as far as I can tell, there's no charge for looking and I'm not interested in anything else."

The fop nodded. "Jusht so's we understand."

"Just so."

Nash heard a stable hand tighten the harness on the fourth horse. They'd be pulling out in moments. Might not have another chance... "Why's she hide her face under that rum topping? Hideous, is she?"

Tate nodded. "As a cow."

Figured.

"Moookink!" Nash muttered under his breath.

"Eh?"

"Said they all look the same in the dark. Good for us, eh?" And Nash cuffed him on the shoulder in the guise of male bonding. Jealous? Certainly not. He wasn't jealous. Didn't want the full-uddered pig for his own. Fuck no. He wasn't that much of a jolter head.

"All ready!" The call came from the door.

Nash knocked back the remainder of his drink then parked his glass on the bar. Stepping back, he said, "Time to go."

"Oh, they'll wait for me. Don't doubt it for a shecond," Dandy slurred. "I tipped 'em too."

Conceited arse.

At least the humid stink of the place and the full-bodied liquor wiped his nose free of the fragrant desire Princess exuded.

He wished his cock would forget the sight of her tits as quickly as his nose forgot the scent of her cream.

How much were indentures?

The thought formed before he could squelch it.

* * * * *

A true lady never allows others to stand in the way of her own happiness, or so her friend Mary had said on more than one occasion.

Granted, Laney had never sought to be a "true lady" — she'd had enough of their airs and looking up their snooty noses when she first arrived at Mrs. Michaels. But happiness? Now that was worth seeking, even though she often despaired of ever remembering what it felt like to be truly happy.

You are in command of your own contentment, come what may from outside forces. Recalling her friend's teachings always warmed Laney. A pity the stranger's refusal had chilled her to the bone.

Why should his abrupt dismissal cause her such dismay? There were other men. Surely, other routes to safety...

Pointedly ignoring the well of hopelessness that filled her at his rejection, Laney took the moment of solitude in the coach to loosen the strings of her reticule and retrieve the most recent letter she'd received from Mary Delilah Middleton.

Dear tolerant, wonderful Mary, the closest friend Laney had in the world, the one person who had made her time at Mrs. Michaels' bearable. Laney glanced at the date in the top right corner, admiring as she did so, her friend's penmanship, which was perfection as always.

June 1st, the Year of our Lord 1812

Mary was always so formal. Laney did a quick calculation. It had been seventy-seven days since Mary's last post. Just over two and a half months since she'd had word from her friend—and this one delivered into her hands one afternoon when Reginald was out. Secretly, Laney suspected Reginald of intercepting her mail. Ever since his odious brother caught him in a compromising position and he'd severed ties with Neils, Reginald had become completely irrational. Irritable too.

Determined to put the entire unpalatable situation from her mind, Laney flicked the not-so-crisp parchment, wrinkled from being stuffed in her bag. Since her unsettling vision of death and doom, she'd taken to keeping her friend's last letter with her at all times—small comfort, perhaps, but Laney knew enough about life to take comfort where she found it. She strove to give every appearance of reading the missive with her utmost attention. Her efforts were severely hampered when not only Reginald but the dratted stranger boarded.

How was she supposed to concentrate with a heavy lump lumped in next to her and an attractive scoundrel shuffling his booted foot directly alongside hers?

"Appalling!" Absolutely appalling, his lack of manners.

"What, dear?"

"Yours too!" she couldn't help but complain when Reginald turned his liquor-soused breath her direction.

"Eh?"

"Nothing," she apologized contritely, "I misspoke."

It was difficult not to flinch when the boot slid forward, practically caressing her instep.

Additional passengers clambered up top, creating such a ruckus the *mêlée* above her head just barely drowned out the one inside her chest.

"Wha's this?" Reginald attempted to grab the letter from her lap, and Laney used the abrupt motion of the coach lurching into motion to quickly stuff it back inside her reticule.

She didn't trust him not to confiscate this one too. "Simply my list of traveling reminders, Mr. Tate. Nothing you need concern yourself with."

"Very well. Here." He dropped his hat into her lap and slouched until his head lolled against her shoulder. "Think'll nap a bit, m'dear."

Tempted to allow his hat to fall to the floor and be trampled underfoot—if not the stranger's then hers!—Laney nevertheless grabbed it and held on. It was either that or release her vexation once and for all and clout both men in their upper story with the spanking-new beaver.

As if he could read the thoughts racing through her mind, the stranger kicked up one corner of his mouth. She noticed two nicks across his lips and smiled—easy to do behind the safety of her veil.

What manner of activity might have resulted in such a scar? From a hatpin perhaps?

Knowing she had several on her person, Laney decided to spend the remainder of their journey contemplating how, if he persisted in his refusal to be swayed by her sincere requests, perhaps a hatpin attack might prove more convincing.

Although, with every tilt of his eyebrows, glint of his eyes and flex of his foot, it became more and more difficult to formulate a plan of escape *and* ignore the restless feeling growing between her legs. Gads, but this trip was proving to be disastrous indeed.

* * * * *

He hated Eleanor.

Bloop. Bloop. Bloop. His head was swimming like a fucking finless fish!

He hated Eleanor.

Bloop. Bloop.

Hated Eleanor.

No he didn't. But he did hate how being around her made him feel.

All inferior and ineffective. Impotent.

Hated —

No he didn't, the one, small sober part of him protested. How could he resent the most innocent ray of sunshine in his life? He couldn't...

But deep down, Reginald knew he did. Was slowly starting to detest her with every shred of his being. God. How had his life come to this? Where would it end?

With his cock driving into her cunt and his seed erupting inside her pussy, that's where, some inner devil prompted.

Reginald could practically hear George John cheering.

"Since our father met The Maker, I'm in charge of this family," he'd heard the words enough times they replayed automatically in his drowning brain, "and Tate don't breed mollies! Now I don't know all the details and I don't want to know 'em, but you have a stunner situated under your roof and you better start plowing her now!"

Fired up after one of George John's inspiring speeches, corned off his arse after breaking things off with Neils, Reginald had tried to do just that — tried to take Eleanor like a man.

His body had only embarrassed them both. She'd seemed willing enough, if not necessarily eager, but his pecker wouldn't poke. She was too...curvy. Just touching her made his hands feel creepy.

So he drank some more and tried again.

He'd almost made it inside her that last attempt, before his dick petered out. Along with his pride. How much was a man supposed to take?

And then she tried to escape. She fucking tried to leave him!

Reginald hadn't needed a speech from George John to know it was time to show Eleanor just who owned whom.

But he'd never meant to mark her as he had. He hadn't meant to do it. She'd just made him so nauseatingly mad, he couldn't seem to stop himself.

Couldn't stop himself from sucking on the cheroot between his lips, drawing hard and causing the tip to flare... Couldn't stop himself from pulling her closer, shoving her sleeve up, her glove down and baring her arm.

Couldn't stop himself from applying the end of the cheroot to her skin and holding it there. Holding it there while her flesh sizzled and smoked, while she attempted—unsuccessfully—to jerk from his grasp as tears came into her eyes and finally fell free...

And then he did it a second time.

He'd hadn't been able to stop any of those actions. Nor had he been able to halt the erection that flared to life along his cock. For once, Reginald had felt like a *man*.

But neither had he been able to staunch the guilt that dogged his steps for days afterward. Eleanor had locked herself in her room. Reginald had locked himself away with another bottle, hoping to drown his guilt. Instead, smothering his common sense.

Bloop. Bloop.

Which was ultimately why he'd undertaken this deuced journey before he permanently scared—or scarred—Eleanor. Or completely lost whatever remnant of self-respect he still laid claim to.

For, according to George John, the end of this journey held the one thing Reginald needed above all others—the promise of sexual oblivion. George John assured him the house party they were heading toward would drive Reginald to the edge of fear and pain that would harden his cock for a woman as nothing else had. And keep it hard. Curing him once and for all.

It was his only hope.

That if he took her soon...discovered what truly fired his blood *for a woman*, he could finally make use of Eleanor. Then set her free.

After he proved to himself and George John that he *could* get a female pregnant.

* * * * *

Wretched man! Laney was still fuming hours later when they stopped for the night and he stepped on her skirts with his other foot in his haste to exit the stagecoach.

Reginald was no help. Or no harm, either, practically passed out drunk as he was.

When had he started drinking strong spirits as if they were ale? The past few weeks had seen an increase in his imbibing, surely, but even so, Laney was starting to think she'd never known him at all.

When they'd met, she'd thought him the most dashing, most handsome, kindest man in the world, and he had been—until his elder brother unexpectedly came into a title and a wagonload of airs and then started pressuring Reginald to marry.

Laney wasn't sure whether it was subverting his true nature or another reason entirely, but ever since he'd broken off with his friend Neils, Reginald had begun behaving differently toward her. He'd developed a mean streak. One that now terrified her. Though not as much as his brother did. Every time George John was near, his eyes narrowed with a look that told Laney if she wasn't under Reginald's "protection" she'd have even more to fear.

The ostler poked his head in. "You's gotta get down, miss. I needs ta wheel the coach into the stable an' un'itch the 'orses."

"Certainly. I...um..." She nudged Reginald.

A half snore-snort was his response.

"Will you give us a few moments more?"

The man tipped his hat, a look of pity in his eyes. "Yessum. I can spare a coupla minutes, but I ain't got all night."

"I'll rouse him and we'll step down in a trice. I promise."

"Ow about I send a stable 'and out to 'elp?"

"Yes, please. If you would be so kind."

This was her chance! With Reginald unconscious, she could leave and be far away by the time he came to his senses. A surge of excitement gripped her.

She could really do this! Giddy over the prospect, Laney only halfheartedly paid attention when a young man from the inn came to help drag Reginald from the coach.

"W' there yet?" Reginald asked, hanging on to the youth like the soggy drunk he'd become.

"Jus' about. Me name's Johnny, ma'am. Me family runs The Black Boar."

"W' there yet?" Reginald repeated.

Bore was right.

"We're at The Black Boar Inn," she told him, not caring when his prize beaver fell and landed in the yard. In a pile of wet horse manure. She certainly wouldn't be picking it up!

Moderating her tone to disguise any hint of her plans, Laney said, "This nice man will escort you to a room while I secure our lodgings and supper. I'll be up presently."

She looked at Johnny, eyebrows raised in query, forgetting for a moment he couldn't see her. Belatedly, she tacked on, "Assuming that's acceptable?"

"Sure it is, ma'am." The youth stumbled once then hefted Reginald's dead weight against his side. "I'll git your gent fit as a fivepence an' take 'im straight up the stairs. You can talk to me ma about supper an' order up a bath if the tub ain't done been claimed."

"I'm most appreciative, thank you. Ah, just one thing..." She motioned for Johnny to stop and scoured Reginald's pockets for the coins he always kept on his person.

Weakly, he tried to bat her away. "Whadya doin'? Get your hands off me, woman!"

As if she wanted them there either! "I'm in need of funds to pay the innkeeper."

Somehow that reached through his soused brain and he plopped several coins in her hands.

While she followed the men inside then veered off toward the main counter, her mind raced over a hundred and one things.

With the unexpected windfall Reginald had just handed her, her opportunities seemed vastly improved over what they had just seconds before. But she couldn't run off like a featherbrain. She still had the marks on her arm, testifying to his temper. No, if she was going to escape for real this time, she had to think things through.

She needed to eat first, maybe set aside a spot of food for later. No time for a bath. Who knew how long Reginald would stay in his drunken stupor?

All she had to do upstairs once she confirmed he was dead drunk for the night was find her indenture papers. He always kept them secreted in his locked trunk. Granted, they might be registered with the magistrate or some other officious official back in London, but as Laney didn't ever intend on returning, it shouldn't matter. As far as she was concerned, she'd be free!

* * * * *

Positively ages later, or at least that's how it seemed, though in fact only a few minutes had passed, Laney was still standing in line. *Still*. Every other passenger had claimed a small portion of the common room or obtained the key to a private one upstairs. Everyone *except* the scoundrel with the glowing eyes.

Lordy, but the man was tall. And had excessively broad shoulders. She'd like to see him take a jab at Reginald—her "owner" would hit the ground flying and probably wouldn't move for a week. It was a pity that the stranger wouldn't help her, but she'd take care of things herself. Laney Catherine Buckley was no weak-willed female. No sirree. She had a plan, and as soon as she escaped—

A sudden surge of dizziness swept over her from her head down. She listed forward and bumped into *his* broad back.

"Bloody hell! Watch it!" he called over his shoulder then his eyes widened when he saw who'd crashed into him. He turned and steadied her upper arms. "Pardon me. Do you need assistance? A drink?"

So faint she could hardly stand, Laney nodded, stalling for time. "A restorative, please..."

Then it happened again and she staggered forward, straight into his chest.

Candles flared to life one after the other all around her, leaving her nude body bathed in their golden glow. Beyond the flickering light, it was black as pitch. A heavy, perfumed haze hung in the air.

Thin red streaks slashed across her exposed skin. Rivulets of deep red blood dripped from several.

Laney bit her lips against the urge to cry out.

Her woman's mound throbbed in agony. Laney looked down and saw the torn flesh between her legs.

Bloodied. Raw.

Inside, she felt her life force slipping away.

In the darkness surrounding her, she heard the sounds of excitement, sensed the wildness...the primal atmosphere of a pack of feral animals closing in for the kill.

She shut her eyes against the pain. Against the surety of death.

For unlike the last gruesome vision she beheld, this wasn't the casual disinterest of a mourner attending the wake of a stranger she felt. It was the panicked certainty that her minutes on earth were numbered and no matter how she might plead, her dying breath was imminent.

There were too many participants eager for her death – wishing for it, praying for it. Expecting it.

A crack exploded next to her ear and her eyes flew open.

Naked, his own body speckled with blood, Reginald stepped into the circle of candles. The sinuous serpent of the leather whip he wielded came closer and closer as it alternatively snaked along the rough stone floor and glided through the midnight air.

His eyes were wild, his breathing heightened. He bore the look of a madman...how she imagined an opium-eater would appear.

Between his legs, his cock shone. Hard for once. *Red.*

Covered in her blood.

The lash whispered past her ear, sliced into her neck. Then again, lower, carving into the flesh of her breast.

Laney fought against the bonds that held her captive and cried out with all her might. "Nooooo!" She wasn't ready to die. She wasn't! "Stop it! I'm not ready to –"

"Woman! What in God's name is wrong with you?"

Dazed, Laney blinked. Blood thundered in her ears. Her flesh burned from the sting of the whip. Terror clawed its way over every inch of her skin. "Nooooo!"

"Stubble it! Normal people don't scream over nothing," the deep voice accused while he shook her harder. *He.* The man from the stagecoach.

They were at an inn, Laney reminded herself, her breathing labored. A simple tavern. They'd stopped when the rains prevented their traveling at night. *Night.*

Darkness and whips and blood.

Gads, she was going to die. A horrible, pain-filled death. *If* she didn't sever her ties with Reginald straightaway.

A shudder racked her entire body and the man's fingers tightened their hold. He was muttering something about hats and swine, but his prattle was secondary to the feel of the whip striking her flesh, of warm blood dripping between her thighs. Down her legs.

Laney stomped her feet to rid herself of the unsettling sensations then realized she'd somehow wound her fingers in his jacket, making it quite impossible for him to release her. Unconscionable! Depending on such a surly brute—what *was* her body thinking?

Thrusting him away with more force than necessary, Laney let loose a frustrated cry and bent to slap at her legs. Fast, frantic swipes followed by several hops of her feet. "Bugs! Dashed bugs!" she shrieked, hoping to direct his attention away from how she'd leaned into him. Away from her inexplicable incident of sheer madness—for that's how she must appear to the others. "A spider—or something! Nothing more."

With an aplomb she was far from feeling, Laney straightened, relieved as ever she had the shielding veil to hide behind.

"Do forgive me." Her voice was composed as crystal, she was pleased to note. "I positively detest insects. Loathsome creatures!"

"You are one totty-headed female," he said dismissively, turning back to the proprietress who was staring at Laney as if she'd just accused the place of selling bottled leeches. Maybe she should be? She'd like to slap a few of the suckers on Reginald's stupefied form right about now.

"Please. Forgive me," Laney apologized again, still flustered. Never had a vision come on so strong or been so intense. Never had she felt *locked* within it and unable to separate her present from scenes of the future. Even now, the dank feel of the dark dungeon setting seemed to be sucking at her—no leeches necessary—luring her deeper into the pit of what would happen lest she make swift, significant alterations to her current plans.

But the strong musky scent of the brooding stranger filled her nostrils, enticing her to breathe him in, which she gratefully did. Deeply. The remembered strength of his arms told Laney more than anything that she was solidly in the present, her nightmare nothing but brain mist. Not real. Not unless it came true... *Until* it came true.

That settled it, then. After seeing the outcome if she left on her own, Laney knew it would be foolhardy to proceed. "Definitely won't be running away," she whispered under her breath, more determined than ever to escape Reginald, but totally clueless now how to go about it. Why couldn't her bloomin' visions show her *what* to do, instead of simply the result of her actions?

"I don't 'ave no bugs nor spiders in my establishment! The Boar's a banging place, it is." The woman behind the counter drummed her fingers over the rough wood and

glared at Laney as if she'd give her the boot if her "husband" wasn't already upstairs passed out. "Now are ye feelin' poorly or not? I can't be bringin' no sickness inside. You'll 'ave to get your mister and get out if—"

"No, no. I'm not ailing. Not at all." Laney hastened to assure her. She locked her legs to stop their trembling and gestured toward *him*. "Please conclude your business. I don't mind waiting."

"The room?" Nash prompted the proprietress, heartily annoyed at the caterwauling woman behind him. "I haven't been stuffed in a damp stagecoach all day just to stand here all night."

"With 'er mister already upstairs there's only one room left. You can 'ave it but th' latch's busted on—"

"It'll do." He didn't mean to bark, but hell, if he was afraid of being robbed—which he wasn't—he could always shove a piece of furniture behind the door. And after having his hands on *her*—though for very different reasons than he'd been fantasizing all demmed day, he was more than ready for the privacy of his own room. "The key?"

The innkeeper's puzzled expression didn't ease, in fact, it kept bobbing between him and the deranged princess. Her little anti-bug dance had him wanting to slap the damn hat from her head, dislodge the veil once and for all and see what all the hullabaloo was about. Lift up her skirts while he was at it. He seriously doubted any insects had scurried beneath her dress. On the contrary, her inane screaming had most likely sent them all scurrying into the next shire.

Damn, but the woman had a set of lungs on her beneath those disguised diddeys! And if he didn't find a pair to fondle and fuck soon, he'd be the one screaming.

Today was just one demmed delay after another, wasn't it? If it weren't for the cursed rain, he'd be on the road in a trice, moon or no. As it was, he plunked the appropriate coinage on the counter and the proprietress gratefully swept up the money and procured a room key. When she handed it over, he closed his fingers around the cool metal and hesitated.

"Do you have anyone you...ah..." Nash began then stumbled to a halt and looked over his shoulder at the dull swift behind him. He scowled at the veiled mystery then turned back to the proprietress and flipped another coin on the counter. Hell, his request for feminine company would have to wait. "Will you at least send up a bath?"

"I can do that, I can. I'll get me Johnny right on it. Your room is directly up th' stairs. Third door on your left."

Picking up the bag by his feet, he gave the spider-hating female one last dark look then disappeared around the corner.

* * * * *

Nash paced the confines of his room like a caged lion.

Only his cell contained a decent-sized bed—something to be thankful for—small table, shuttered window, closed to keep out the earlier rains, and an overhead lantern he kept having to duck.

With every swath he cut across the meager floor space, the lantern cast his shadow over the room.

Nash fancied he could see the four-legged creature in his place. And he didn't have to look very hard, either.

There was no reason he should feel this primal and primed to fuck. Not now. It wasn't as if *he'd* gone days without. No, just as he did every year when the sun passed through Leo, he abandoned his dreams and turned himself over to battling the beast the only way he knew—by fucking any wench he could. Once a day sufficed.

He still had a several-hour grace period, so why was his skin crawling with arousal?

Maybe the curse was growing worse. Maybe he was becoming weaker.

Maybe it was simply her damn magnificent tits.

Or the remembered intoxicating scent of her cream. But no...the sharp, sickening bite of fear she'd exuded downstairs had wiped away any hint of desire.

Strange, that she'd become so completely unhinged like that.

But not his problem!

No, his problem was the fucking prick stirring the front of his breeches. Bloody hell. He'd allowed the two other passengers who wanted private rooms to go before him, intending to be the last one. Intending to ask that a wench be sent up to his room. But oh no, Miss Veiled Won't-You-Buy-My-Indenture-Please-Kind-Sir had to come along and spoil it. Batting her eyelashes, or so he'd expect, if he could have seen her damn face.

A tap on the door heralded the arrival of his bath. "Mr. 'ammond? It's Johnny. I've brung your tub."

Nash swung the door open, gratified to see the huge tub of steaming water carried by a strapping lad, followed by two maids. The young man deposited the metal tub in the middle of the floor and it practically took up every bit of spare walking space. His pacing was at an end it seemed.

But his body craved a relaxing soak and his cock perked up farther when the maids shuffled all the way in with even more recently boiled water, judging by the careful way they carried the pots.

Neither wench had the body, or the veil, of his recent tormentor. Which was fine with him.

After a fast glance and quick blush, one of the maids avoided looking at him directly, but the other one boldly stared him down as she walked backward from the room. Nash stopped Johnny just before he exited. "The wenches. Do they entertain upstairs?"

Johnny smiled knowingly. "Fer a price, they do. Which one 'as your —"

"I don't care. Either will suit." Nash retrieved another coin from his pocket and pressed it into Johnny's palm. "Tell one of them to return in thirty minutes."

"But it's supertime. Ma expects them ta serve —"

Damn. How much longer must he wait? Getting priggid hadn't been this difficult since... Well since, Francine unknowingly tormented his brother. *Goddamn her*. "Fine then. After supper. And bring me a bottle of cognac."

"Cawn-yawk?"

"There a problem?" If he had to wait, he might as well indulge. If anything, tipping a bottle back would take his mind off his pulsing erection.

"I don't think Ma keeps cognac," the youth repeated the word as if he'd never heard it before. What? Did no other travelers through here appreciate the fine beverage to be found in western France and request it by name? Nash had developed an affinity for the rich brandy during last year's exodus. For about the eighty-seventh time this month, he wished he'd stayed abroad. Had never returned to England.

"What about ale?" Johnny asked. "Ole Jonesey makes th' best ale in th' shire."

"Ale is for fops." And the longer he was forced to wait, the more he planned on drinking. "Do you have an unopened bottle of whiskey?"

"Whiskey? I believe we do at that." The boy's face pinkened and he nodded hard enough to make himself dizzy, as if embarrassed he hadn't suggested that himself. "Yessir. We should 'ave whiskey."

"Then why don't you bring it up?" Nash said through gritted teeth. Being in possession of his own horse was looking better with each second that passed. Then he could pick and choose his own damn taverns. He felt the snarl barrel up his throat and covered it by biting off, "*Now?*"

"Yessir." The boy, young man really, nodded then left, pulling the door shut behind him.

The moment Nash was alone, he scraped the edge of his fingernails along his scalp, feeling every single individual strand of hair. Damn again. His skin was sensitive.

He was crawling with need, each inch on edge with unrelieved sexual tension. Hurriedly, he slipped his clothes off and lowered his aching body into the hip tub.

"Ahhhhh," Nash sighed. Steam rose up around him. Warm, blessed steam, wiping away every care and thought.

Except that of his aching cock...and the perplexing pig princess below stairs.

Chapter Three

The Deceit of the Deceitful Whore

"Um...Johnny, was it?"

Johnny glanced up from studying the coin in his hand to see the quiet lady from the coach standing just outside her assigned room. He stopped and nodded toward her door. "I did get th' lantern lit an' your trunks brung up, ma'am, but your mister passed out 'fore I could get 'im undressed. I 'ope that's —"

"Of no consequence, thank you. Johnny..." Her covered head twisted from side to side, as if she were checking to make sure they weren't overheard. The hall was deserted. She pointed at the door he'd just closed. "I'll pay you to *not* send one of the girls to his room tonight."

Johnny paused. The subject of female companionship wasn't exactly something to be *discussed* with, well, females, but she'd brought it up. "But ma'am, 'e's expectin' —"

"I'm well aware of what he expects." She leaned forward and pressed two gold coins into his palm. "And he'll receive it. Just not from one of your girls."

So the poor woman wanted some and with her husband out for the night, was hankering for her fellow traveler? Johnny was old enough to know it didn't matter what social class a person inhabited, matters of the flesh—to hear Vicar Thompson proclaim—often overtook a body's common sense.

But he'd just been paid to do a job by the grumpy bloke.

"Please."

Johnny studied the three quid in his hand. It was more than Ma paid him in a month. A lot more.

"But the gent..." It was hard to complain when he simply wanted to wrap his fist around the money and add it to his growing stash in the stable. He had his own plans and they didn't include working for his ma the rest of his days.

"I assure you that he'll never know. I'll take care of him, I promise," she whispered, curving her fingers around his, and even through her gloves, Johnny felt the heat of her touch. "Just please don't say anything. To anyone."

"You can't go in wearin' th' fancy 'at. Nor talkin' all ladylike like you are. 'E'll know for sure you ain't from 'ere."

"I... You're right. I'll take care of it. Now please, not a word."

Moneyed folks were strange. But he was getting richer by the minute. "Nary a word, that I promise. An' if you want, I can bring you a full bottle of whiskey." Johnny bit the inside of his cheek to keep the smirk from his lips. He was having more fun this

evening than he usually had in a fortnight. "Maybe if 'e swallows enough, 'e won't know it's you."

And maybe I'll get another coin.

* * * * *

An hour later, Laney stood outside the stranger's door. Hesitating.

Thankfully, the candle lighting this end of the hallway had been easy to snuff, so she stood in near darkness, but the rumbling sounds from below reminded her that this was a public corridor and anyone could walk by at any moment. Her disguise was in place, but she felt more exposed than ever.

Did she knock and go through with her latest scheme or use the rare opportunity of Reginald being locked unconscious in their room—she'd had the foresight to take that precaution—and escape into the night?

At the thought, a chill crept over her skin. Laney's entire frame gave an involuntary shudder and a weight lodged in her stomach, one that had nothing to do with excitement and everything to do with fear.

Then she considered furthering her association with the stranger, hoping to entice him to help her, whatever means it took. At once, the sick feeling evaporated and Laney felt lighter, a sense of anticipation flooding her limbs.

Heeding the inner intuition, she balled her fist and rapped her knuckles against the door.

If he wouldn't buy her outright, she'd become exactly what he needed in a female, for however long it took—until he *wanted* to own her.

After all, it shouldn't be that hard to feign sexual experience, should it? Didn't men automatically know what they wanted and simply...*take* it? Her free hand tightened around the neck of the liquor bottle. If she could see that he drank enough to become boosey, perhaps he wouldn't notice she was a whore without any whoring credentials.

She knocked again.

Laney heard splashing beyond the door and her brow wrinkled in consternation. Just how long was he supposed to take? Shouldn't he be raring to go, excited and eager at having a willing wench ready to service his every need? Shouldn't he have opened the door at the first hint she'd arrived, swept her off her feet and onto the bed, and commenced to...fornicate with her?

A woman with limited resources had to make her own luck, gamble on the opportunities life tossed her way. One man wasn't any better or worse than any other as far as Laney was concerned. At least, that had been her thinking until being exposed to the real Reginald Tate. Now she definitely knew that some men were worse than others and she was determined to take charge of her own destiny. With Reginald holding her indenture, she might not have many options open to her, but if anything, her erotic vision of having a man's head between her legs had given her ideas. Without

allowing the time to worry herself sick, she knocked again—with more force, turning her knuckles so that she pounded the side of her hand into the door instead.

The rough wood scraped skin usually gloved. How odd it felt, being out of her room and improperly dressed.

Improper? She was standing in a hallway with no response to her knocks, wearing her oldest shift and nothing else, her extra slippers all being packed at the bottom of the trunk she didn't dare scavenge further for fear of waking Reginald. Though she did unearth the latest perfume he'd given her. Out of spite, she hadn't worn it yet, though tonight, however inane the action, she'd taken the time to dab it on her person.

Poised to either kick the blasted door down, bare feet or not, or retreat to her own room, Laney hit the door harder. Louder.

A curse then a growled, "Come!"

"Calling me to heel like a dog," she muttered, unfurling her fist and turning the knob.

Laney pushed the door open, relieved to see that he'd failed to light candles. Night had fallen swiftly after the stormy day and the room was dark. More splashing came from the center. By feel, she shut and locked the door then turned and rested against it.

"At yer service, m'lawd," she said, pitching her voice higher and using an exaggerated version of the street dialect she'd grown up with. If not for Mary, Laney wouldn't know any better. "Johnny said you was wantin' ta...spill yer seed betwixt me legs."

There. That sounded whorish enough. Didn't it?

She thought she heard him mutter, "God save me from stupid women," but decided not to take umbrage when he did say clearly, "I'm glad you could join me. Fell asleep in the bath. I apologize. Long day."

"A bath?" Laney couldn't keep the eager sound from her voice. "Mmm, a bath sounds 'eavenly, it does. M'lawd."

She heard him sigh.

"What's another hour?" he murmured then answered himself just as quickly. "More torture."

Laney took a step into the room. "M'lawd?"

"Light a candle and join me. The water's cold, but there's room enough. You may wash me."

As if she should feel *honored* by the command.

For some reason, she did.

Laney sniffed, unsure whether she should be miffed or not. Perhaps if she roused him to a fever pitch, he wouldn't notice her maidenhead when he breached it.

"Well?" Now he sounded impatient. "We're not here for church work. Make haste, wench!"

With the candle lit, he'd be able to see all of her. But she'd be able to see him too and Laney couldn't help but be intensely curious about how *he* looked undressed.

"Certainly, m'lawd, right 'way." Her curiosity driving her on, she bustled about in the darkness, fumbling toward the bedside table, scrambling to light the taper once she found it. Fingers on the flint, she hesitated once again. Uncomfortable—or unwilling?—to show herself.

Her illusion of privacy was all she owned of herself these days.

Though in order to change her fate, Laney needed to convince or coerce *this* particular man to help her escape Reginald. And she'd do it too, no matter what it took.

Despite her afternoon vision, she couldn't fathom this brute ever loving anyone but himself. She certainly never expected to like him, not with his coarse manners and commanding ways. In fact, she didn't care whether he liked her or not, and she certainly didn't need to expose herself on every level the first time they were alone.

"Well?" he grumbled as if on cue. "Hurry it up, wench. Cold in here." She thought she heard him upend a bottle. "All alone."

Just what she needed—to saddle herself with another drunk.

But then Laney recalled the look in his glowing eyes earlier and heat reached inside, warming her belly and regions lower.

"Close yer eyes. It'll be bright," she ordered, stalling, but unable to resist the lure of seeing him naked.

But just this once, Laney assured herself. She stifled her own ambivalence and holding the taper well away from her face, lit it. The wick flared to life with a poof of flame and smoke and just as quickly, she doused it with her fingertips. "Blighters! That hurt!"

Another splash. "What is it?"

"The, uh...candle burnt out," she lied, surprised by the sting assaulting her fingers—which was what she got for leaving them on the taper too long...because in that brief flash of illumination her eyes had seen enough to permanently etch the picture in her mind.

The picture of his fierce mien subdued by recent slumber and no longer hidden by the wave of dark hair falling across his forehead...his smooth bare chest and shoulders sprinkled with droplets of water...his strong thighs extending beyond the tub, furred with fine black hairs that grew thicker just before the water covered the view...

Mercy. His was a formidable, provocatively inviting presence. One that reached out and touched her in ways she hadn't anticipated.

And she was playing a tavern doxy who had seen it all before.

Swallowing the burning desire to relight the candle, Laney continued playing the part she'd assigned herself.

Rocking her hips from side to side even though he couldn't see her, she approached him. The whiskey bottle a maid had delivered earlier swung heavily from her hand.

"Damn." More splashing. "Well then, pull the curtain and open the shutters, would you? It's dark as Hades in here and I can't seem to find my drying cloth."

"Very well," she huffed. Abandoning her sensual walk, Laney made her way around the tub, only touching his skin once, if the damp patch on her shift was any indication, until she located the back wall. It was an easy matter to slide across it until encountering the curtain. If there had been a curtain, that is. "There isn't one."

Judging from the amount of splashes and curses, he'd risen to his feet in the tub. "What do you mean there isn't one?"

Now Laney had to stifle a laugh. She loved it when life worked in her favor. "It appears to be boarded up. The window, that is. M'lawd," she tacked on when she realized how she kept forgetting to stay in character. "Th' latch's busted."

How much longer must he wait for a piece of pussy?

It seemed the universe was punishing him for his treatment of his brother's woman. Nothing had gone his way since he'd left Erasmus' townhouse.

At first, he'd thought that somehow the family curse had been avenged or submerged or something of the sort because after sharing Francine with Erasmus, Nash's body and spirit had never been so tranquil, not since turning twenty-five. But peace quickly turned to remorse then to penitence, and he'd escaped into the night rather than face either of them.

But now he knew the curse had only been playing with him. For Nash's body felt anything but serene.

"When's the last time you bathed?" he asked the sweet-smelling wench. He hadn't noticed such a pleasant fragrance earlier when they'd brought in his bath water, nor when the bold one delivered his whiskey, along with a wink, a few minutes later. But Nash had an aversion to females who doused themselves in perfume to cover up body stench. "You said you wanted a bath. Do you need one?"

He heard her indrawn breath and swore at his inability to see as well as his brother. They both had senses more acute than any man outside of their family, but where his sense of smell outdistanced any bloodhound on the planet, Erasmus was the one who could see in the dark better than a hawk.

It probably didn't help that he'd been drinking the last hour, intentionally imbibing, hoping the liquor might dampen his desire and fog his brain. Apparently it deadened his olfactory and visionary capabilities as well—stifled his ability to sniff, blunted his ability to behold.

Because Nash could make out her outline, see the pale shift swaying against the wall, could tell that she smelled better than a wench should, but that was it. It seemed, though, that he didn't need any more—the moment she'd walked by the tub his liquor-relaxed cock had jumped to attention and protested any further delay.

Hell, if he'd known his body was going to respond so lustfully, he wouldn't have groggified his mind with drink.

"Well?" he demanded when she remained silent, still unwilling to fuck a filthy strumpet, no matter how aromatically alluring.

"I washed this morning."

He stepped from the tub. "Good. Then you can dry me off."

Two steps later he swept her off her feet, ignored her cry of surprise and smiled when her arms curled around his neck. Finally!

Nash tumbled back onto the bed, ready for his fill of warm, willing wench. Something hard hit him on the back of the head. "Damnation, woman!"

"Oh no!"

Now he could see. Clearly.

He saw spots. Bright ones that flashed before his eyes as the pain cut through his skull.

If he hadn't already imbibed enough to dull at least some of his senses, Nash feared he would have been howling at the unexpected blow. "What're you trying to do? Kill me before I come?"

The bottle fell from Laney's fingers when he growled in pain; her heart dropped just as fast. The whiskey hit the floor with a thump and rolled under the bed.

"I'm so sorry!" She scrambled over him, tugging her shift out of the way when it caught beneath her knees.

Straddling his chest, Laney leaned forward and combed her fingers through his hair, searching for blood or a bump.

"Ow!"

She'd found it, just behind his left ear. A tender area that would likely knot bigger than a duck's egg by morning.

As she stroked over the spot, he gave another groan, but this one certainly wasn't caused by a crack on the head. No, it appeared to be caused by another pain altogether as her fingers caressed his scalp, played with the shell of his ear and touched what must be the softest hair in all of England. Laney not only forgot about the part she was playing, she forgot to breathe.

His hands found their way to her thighs. He pushed her shift up and anchored his palms above her knees — where no man had touched before.

Laney wasn't even sure *she'd* touched herself there...she knew she hadn't when he groaned again and moved those long, searching fingers inward, toward her quim. Her cunny clenched, her pelvis rocked forward and she was riding his bare chest! His lightly furred, soft yet strong chest. Wait. She hadn't noticed any hair there before.

Maybe she just hadn't been close enough. But she was close enough now.

Close enough to smell his outdoorsy, hint-of-the-wild scent, close enough to feel every single strand of hair that whispered over her naked hands, close enough to hear the low growl of satisfaction he made just when his fingers encountered *her* curls.

Laney's breath returned in a whoosh and his hair slipped free.

"Come here." The words were practically purred.

What did he mean? Oh! Her vision. So he *did* like to put his face between her legs. Laney dripped at the thought, remembered the sensations he'd created when he touched her there in the gazebo. "Mmm."

Her body creamed in readiness. She tried to scoot forward but only ended up dragging her pussy across his chest hairs. "Ah."

She wound her fingers in his long hair again and moved against him, using her knees to give her leverage. Once more, she rubbed along his chest, felt her inner lips snag and separate, allowing the most intimate part of her body to glide sleekly over the hard muscle she'd glimpsed just moments before.

Her toes tingled. Her cunt quivered. She pulled harder on his head, afraid to speak, unsure what else to do. Shouldn't he be taking charge by now?

Wasn't he supposed to force his cock between her legs as Reginald had tried? Why did the thought not fill her with fear? But only longing instead?

His fingers tightened on the skin of her inner thighs then he removed one hand and pushed at her chest, angling her away. Laney released his hair on a moan and used both arms to brace herself as she leaned backward and stared up at the ceiling, blinking in the blackness, panting with the surety of what would come next.

But he thwarted her.

"Ah yes, my finely fragranced wench, just like that," she heard him whisper then he swiped several fingers down the seam of her muff.

She flinched then shifted, trying to venture closer.

He touched her again. Lightly. Then again. Still not enough. Her patience snapped and years of ladylike training evaporated. "You dallyin' cur, 's time for you ta join our giblets!"

The darkness filled with his deep laughter. "Time for a taste, I do believe."

"You soddin' beard splitter! Get on with it—touch me harder!" Just when Laney brought one hand to her cleft, he yanked her the rest of the way up his body.

She landed on her back—on his cock!

But she didn't have time to think about how warm and wet he was, how he'd gotten her shift all damp everywhere they'd touched, how his muscled thighs flexed beneath her, how his stomach curled when he arched forward.

She didn't have time to think about any of those things because his mouth was working its way up her pussy.

"Hail Mary," she whispered. Mary, her friend – not the Mother Mary – because the one topic Mary wouldn't ever teach Laney about was sex. Despite how many times she'd asked. Full of nimble-tongued eloquence on every other subject under the sun, Mary was completely reticent about sex.

But based on the way the stranger licked up and down her slit, thrust his tongue deep and swallowed loudly, growled his satisfaction, brought his hands between her legs and spread her open even more, this wasn't something she needed to learn over tea and crumpets.

This was something one could only learn by *doing*. Or better yet, *enjoying*.

Then Laney stopped thinking about her past, forgot about her future and settled in for the most delightful ride between the body and tongue of her irascible stranger.

Nash edged his fingers over her warm pussy, gathering the thick cream trickling from her like a mountain spring.

He brought one hand to his lips and licked. He heard the abrasive sound of his tongue. Realized he needed to come soon or his cells would change enough that he couldn't contain his feral lust. Wouldn't be responsible for his actions. *Should* be, but impossible to care about what one couldn't control, fought to remember...

A quick fuck. A swift grind. That was all he'd wanted. All he'd needed tonight. Prigging a wench to erase the compulsion to change. To obliterate impossible interest in veiled creatures.

So why was it the intoxicating scent of the tavern wench's desire went to his head more than the whiskey? Why did it seem as if he'd caught her scent before...tasted her honey on his lips?

He'd never been to this inn. That he did know.

How could someone with such an unremarkable voice taste – *smell* – like ambrosia?

Nash thrust upward, forcing his cock along her spine, up between her shoulder blades.

He groaned.

His teeth and nails tingled. By damn. He'd sworn he wouldn't let it go this far again. Not after Francine had driven his brother to the point of lunacy – or lionhood – when he'd avoided taking her once The Change had come upon them, causing Nash to lose his own self-mastery more than ever before.

But God, just the taste of the female at his lips was enough to make him long for patience, pray for control. He released her thighs and bracketed her waist, pulling her sweet quim flush against his mouth.

His tongue dove inside and Nash swallowed, drinking down what poured easily past his lips.

Had he ever tasted nectar this pure?

Her squeal penetrated his pussy-soaked brain as she bucked against his mouth. Nash dug his fingers in, held her still, and angled his tongue high, searching out the tiny pearl hidden in her folds.

One flick, two—and she recoiled, dragging that cunny burrow of hers over his whiskered jaw and keening her pleasure to the heavens.

“Damn, doll. That was quick.” Nash licked his lips, wiped his chin then licked his hand clean, one delicious finger at a time. “You’re a fast one, aren’t you?”

She was panting, that squeal of hers echoing around them both, invading in his blood, his cells and causing his cock to harden further.

Almost sorry it was over so soon, but knowing he’d dallied longer than was prudent, Nash growled low in his throat and propped up on his elbows.

He was past ready, and since he’d done the gentlemanly thing for once—see? he wasn’t always a selfish bastard—and given her pleasure first, it was time for his own demmed orgasm.

That or he refused to be held responsible for the consequences. Ah hell. And that thought only made him think of Phineas.

“That’s...it?” the warm bundle on his lap asked.

“Not bloody likely,” he snarled, suddenly mad at himself, at her. At his misbegotten life. “You’ll not be earning your coins that easily.”

“What?”

“*Shhht!*” Irritated now, Nash pushed her off, but kept her from leaving the bed by shackling one hand around her wrist. He climbed to his knees and forced her facedown on the bed.

“What are you doin’?” she shrieked into the mattress.

He smiled grimly at her muffled words. She’d find out soon enough.

The wench tried to rise and he easily contained her efforts with a hand to her upper back. “Stay put!”

“But I—”

“You had yours, now it’s my turn.” With an impatient grunt, Nash searched in the dark until both hands had a firm hold on her shift. Matching actions to the ferocious beating of his heart, he pierced the thin material with his nails and easily ripped it apart.

“What’re ya doin’, you stupid whoreson?”

“Quit screeching, wench. There’ll be another coin in it for you.”

Like a bloody trained mule, his hand returned to her back—now *bare*—and used the excuse of holding her down to feel her up.

Nash gripped his erection with his opposite hand. Holy hell, he was hard. He’d waited too fucking long.

He could feel The Change coming closer, racing along his veins, approaching the surface. He clamped down on his eager cock.

He hadn't watched the time. Had let too many hours pass...but still, he shouldn't be feeling this way *now*... It made no sense, but then nothing had since learning that his brother—his independent, didn't-need-anybody and wouldn't-let-anyone-close brother—had *fallen in love*.

And with a true, genteel lady at that.

The kind of female Nash secretly longed for but knew was way out of his reach. At least Erasmus had the title, the cachet of being a marquis, to go along with the curse.

What did Nash have?

A stinkin' plot of land somewhere in the north, gifted to him by Erasmus, that he hadn't cared enough to visit, much less inspect or oversee.

A habit of never sleeping in the same bed twice, never staying put or allowing himself to become close to anyone, because what was the use?

And a rigid cock that wanted nothing more than to split the slit of the wench beneath him right in two and take his pleasure *inside her body*.

But he couldn't even do that, could he? Nash thought, gripping his cock so hard he almost squeezed the semen right out. Of course he couldn't, not with the very real possibility of siring a helpless bastard, one who would have to endure the curse just as Nash and Erasmus did. Just as Phineas and the other afflicted kinsmen he didn't bother to name because for him, it always came down to one...

Poor, lost Phineas.

The familiar thoughts of self-pity should've dimmed his desire to fuck her in the cunt. They always did. Instead, thinking how hopeless things were only made Nash want to take this *one* more.

They weren't hopeless, some unforeseen angel prompted.

Or maybe it was the devil.

Erasmus found someone, didn't he? You can too. Go on, why don't you take her in the pussy? Claim her as your own? Claim her hot, tight little cunt?

Pretend you're her first...that she's your very own "lady".

"Because I damn well don't deserve it!" Nash squeezed his dick harder. If he closed his fist around it tight enough, might it explode? Or shatter?

Silence the devil's impossible chatter?

Nash stroked his length. He couldn't come. Had to wait. But, oh God, her skin was soft...

"Don't deserve what?" she questioned, writhing beneath his restraining hand, trying to roll over. He refused to let her.

So close. His orgasm was so close to the surface. Just a little more and...and... His hand moved faster.

Dammit! He had to calm down, couldn't spill his seed without the touch of a woman. It'd be useless. The compulsion to change wouldn't abate. He'd need to fuck her again in order to stop it. As it was, Nash didn't have the goddamn restraint to go through this again. He willed his hand to slow, willed his cock to relax.

It was like commanding the sun to stop shining.

"Deserve what? Aren't you supposed to be—" the bitch protested again.

Didn't she know any better? He pinched the back of her neck, hoping to shut her up. Couldn't she tell he was struggling?

She reared up beneath him. "I thought you—"

"Shut the hell up, wench," he barely stopped himself from calling her a bitch out loud. "Don't want to hurt you."

He ignored her whimper and released his throbbing cock, groping in the darkness until he pulled the torn sides of her shift completely away from her arse.

When she kept fighting to sit up and trying to twist around, he wound his fingers in her hair and yanked hard enough to let her know who was in charge. "Lady, I'm paying for the privilege. I took care of you, so quit—"

"But you didn't—"

"*Complaining!*" he roared.

Thank God she heeded him and finally shut her box. Stilled her struggles. Moaned her compliance.

Troublesome wench. Just because she was clean, her scent divine and her cunny tasted better than fine cognac was no reason for her to go and act all uppity.

She was just a paid whore after all.

It wasn't as if *she* were a lady. As though he had any cause to feel guilty for being so harsh with her. He still shouldered enough guilt from the debacle with Francine. Didn't need any more from a nameless, faceless wench in the dark.

Hers was just a body. Nothing more. Anyone's would've done just as well.

But he had hers right where he wanted it. Lying prone between his knees. Under his power. Bought and paid for. His for the moment. Or as long as he chose to keep her. Maybe for the night.

His hand tracked across her arse, dipping in between her legs so he could smear her cream along her crack.

Oh God, but her skin...

Nash shuddered. His entire body quaked. She'd reduced him to this?

Impossible.

Wasn't her. Couldn't be. It was The Change.

Exhausted from holding back, Nash positioned himself on top of her, covered her spine with his chest, her arse with his groin. Nudged his thighs along hers...and sank

down, wedging his cock between the glorious globes of her butt. Wished he could see the damn sight, but at the moment, feeling was just as good.

He couldn't stop the sigh of relief that escaped his lips when he felt the friction of her plump bottom...the heat along his cock. Moist heat. Her pussy juice surrounding him. Slicking his cock.

His mouth watered. He wanted another taste.

Her murmured, "Mmmm...?" was a distraction. Why did her voice develop such an enticing lilt when she wasn't speaking words?

"That's it, doll," he returned, sliding his cock along her arse.

Finally, *finally*, he felt her relax and sink into the straw mattress, felt her moan vibrate through them both when she arched her backside into his groin.

And Nash knew he'd made it in time and he expected to make the next few seconds even better.

Stretching out completely, he aligned his legs over hers, tucking his feet around her dainty ones, blanketing her entire form. He started to move in earnest, rocking his hips and wedging his cock deeper along the crevice of her arse. Driving forward. Again and again.

He wound his left arm along hers and grasped her hand, threaded their fingers. But instead of doing the same with his right, he wrapped it around her torso, scooted his palm between her sweat-dampened body and the mattress and slid his hand low until his fingers were diving through the curls between her legs, splitting the flesh just below and sliding inside just enough to gather the thick honey waiting there. For him.

Pumping his hips faster, Nash curved his fingers inward, harvesting her essence. Then he pulled free and swiftly brought his hand to his mouth.

Thrust. Lick.

Pump. Lick.

Thrust. *Thrust. Thrust! Lick and swipe and suck...*

And release...

"Uhhh."

As his cock lurched along her butt and up part of her back as his mouth sucked his longest finger deep, as he tasted every bit of her he could salvage and poured out his climax...

Nash grunted like an animal while he came.

And for once, he didn't give a damn.

The stranger's feral shout still blasting in her ears, Laney felt his release erupt against her back.

With every lurch of his body along hers, his warm seed spread over her skin. When he finally stilled, he tightened his arms around her and shifted, rolling to his side and

bringing her and the remnants of her shift with him. The pseudo night rail was still on her arms, still covering her entire front, but it was ruined now. Useless to wear under her dresses if it wouldn't fasten.

She waited, expecting him to toss her a coin and toss her off the bed.

So that's all there was? she wondered with a disappointed hitch somewhere in the vicinity of her heart—and lower. Just this vague unfulfilled yearning between her thighs? Why, *why* hadn't he come inside her there? That had been the entire purpose of the intimate event, had it not?

Laney bit down on her lip, unaccountably frustrated. Her cunny ached and rejoiced at the same time. His lips—his tongue!—had kissed between her legs and she'd sensed her body responding deep inside...felt that rising pinnacle within her core, the one that told her she was about to experience what made the sex act enjoyable instead of simply endured. But then he'd stopped. *Stopped*. And completely withdrew his tongue and touch.

Should she not have yelled out?

Maybe paid whores were supposed to remain silent? But Laney hadn't been able to control her cry of delight when his tongue started bathing the weeping flesh between her legs. It had felt so...so...miraculous.

Like her visions. They were miracles, her grandmum had told her, a gift from God.

And look what kind of trouble she'd landed herself into this time, paying attention to *those*! Completely naked, alone with the intense stranger, Reginald in the next room, her body aching and yearning and... *Aching*, damn him!

She huffed an impatient breath and released her lip. He still had not relaxed his arms, given her leave to...*leave*! How much longer must she wait for him to dismiss her? Or perhaps, to push her to her back and plow inside her quim? To rut with her like a dog in heat—for that's what she'd really expected from one with such coarse manners.

His breath sighed across her cheek. A faint exhalation of utter satisfaction—certainly, he'd *finished*, now hadn't he?

Still peeved, it took her a moment to realize that he'd loosened his top arm from around her waist and slid his spread palm up her stomach—which contracted—past her breasts—which protested—over her throat—which tingled—stopping only when he reached her chin.

Still as a stone undergoing silent seduction, Laney waited once more.

One long finger separated itself from the pack and began to trace the contours of her jaw. His touch feathered over her cheekbone and across the arch of first one eyebrow then the next, the caress so unexpectedly delicate, how was it she now tingled clear to her toes?

Laney held her breath, willing him to continue.

"Tell me why you're here." The words rasped across her ear and an involuntarily spasm shook her soul.

Did he know? Was he about to explode and take her in anger? Was the gentle, soothing touch even now cascading down her temple only a prelude to something vicious?

But how could it be when the sensual journey of his finger continued...tracing down her nose, the little divot above her lips...

"Tell me."

"'Ere? With you, you mean?" Laney stumbled over her reply, but the pressure of his stroking finger remained as light as down, barely skating over her quivering lips, "Why, m'lawd, you tol' Johnny that you wanted—"

"Shhh." His touch settled more firmly upon her mouth, stilling her response. "Not that," he continued, and his fingers began to move again, this time tracing the width of her lips, pausing at the corners, making her mouth dry up and her loins sweat. "Not that. *Here*. In this town, this inn. How did you come to be here at The Black Boar?"

I took the same stage as you, you dolt, she almost told the cad, but speech required too much effort. Laney preferred to stay silent, enjoying the shivers careening from her stomach to her thighs, shivers created by his unanticipated exploration of her face...her neck. She swallowed.

Gracious, her throat had gone tight.

He tensed and the muscular nuances of his chest rippled along her bare back. "Answer me. What brings a woman to a place like this? How long have you been here? *Why* do you stay?"

Clueless how to respond to such questions, Laney made a noncommittal murmur.

The hand beneath her waist tightened. "Circumstances? Desire? Did you choose to be here? I want to know."

Need to know, she heard, even though he didn't say it.

"You're a most perplexin' man," Laney finally gave voice to her turbulent thoughts, gulping when his searching finger trailed down her neck, skidded past her chest and began that same slow, torturous journey over and around her covered breasts. Wispy tracks of his fingers that left streaks of fire in their wake and made her aware of a gaping hole in her heart.

Who knew men could touch like this? Who knew *he* would?

Why hadn't she let him rip her damn shift off when he'd tried? Why hadn't he just bought her dratted indenture when she'd asked?

Frustrated with herself, frustrated with him for leaving her *wanting*, Laney answered. Under the cover of night, in his warm embrace, it was easy to move past the customary veil that protected her every day from the outside, unknown world. "I'm here, in this place, at this time, simply because of fate, I suppose. Circumstance, I'd have to say based on your choices. My family..." How much of the truth did she want to reveal? "My family's gone, the ones who would care what happens to me, certainly, and I've..."

Oh Lord. She'd forgotten her accent. Blighters! She had to remember to stay in character. How hard could it be when she'd grown up not knowing any better? Years of Mary's tutelage was making it difficult indeed. Laney sincerely doubted tavern wenches discussed their family history with paying partners!

"I've realized...*learnt*, I mean, that..." She trailed off, doubtful he was really listening. Knowing he couldn't really care.

"Go on," he encouraged, and those amazing tingle-provoking fingers worked their way to her beaded nipple and were dancing around it in tiny forays. His nails snagged against the fine fabric, dragging it across her breasts and Laney's cunny clenched tight. She wished fervently he was dancing around down *there* again, between her legs.

Who knew thighs that felt so *wet*, could also feel so fiery hot?

"Mmmm. Well, I've been on my own fer a time, m'lawd and it is what it is. Life I mean." There. She sounded prosaic enough, didn't she? Did tavern wenches even do prosaic? "I'm just muddlin' my way through to the end, best I know how."

Her pelvis arched forward as if seeking his touch, the slickness between her thighs encouraging Laney to open her mouth and ask for—

"And what do you think is there at the end?" he queried, and she never would have known by the seriousness of his tone that his fingers had just pinpointed her nipple right through the fabric, were pinching and plucking at it, encouraging it to tighten and harden. As if the nub needed any further encouragement!

"What awaits us at the end, do you think?" he continued, both his question and his nipple torture. "Heaven? Hell? *Nothing*? What do you believe in?" He released her aching nipple—never having fully satisfied her there either—and skimmed his broad palm down her side, stopping only when he reached the bunched edges of her shift and settling his hand firmly at her waist. But going no further.

Laney whimpered at the loss, struggling to form a coherent reply. She'd heard the true curiosity in his whispered question. She'd heard the pain.

"I don't know if I believe in 'eaven or in 'ell," she told him honestly, her mind whirling that she could even be having such a discussion with anyone, but especially with the rotter who'd stepped on her hem mere hours ago. "Maybe I'm in heaven right now," she mused, stretching her legs and tangling them with his, loving the hairy roughness of his skin against hers. "Maybe this is all there truly is—stolen moments in life that bring pleasure and happiness to one's soul...and flesh."

He grunted and tightened his fingers against her waist, and Laney held her breath. *Now. Now he'll flip me over and take me. Now he'll ease this throbbing ache created by his gossamer touch—*

But wait.

He grunted again, lighter this time, longer. His hand went slack. Warm breath breezed past her cheek, tinted with spirits.

Laney's heart sank. Damn bloomin' blighter! Her cunny cursed its empty state and Laney had to bite her lip to keep from spewing the words out loud like a fishwife.

The blasted fiend had fallen asleep!

Chapter Four

The Pig and the Princess

"Aye, folks, th' rain's seems to 'ave moved off durin' th' night," the coachman chimed out when Nash boarded early the next morning, the words belied by the gray clouds hovering overhead.

Head aching from too much liquor, too little sleep and the knot the wench'd knocked into his noggin, Nash had to restrain the impulse to clout the loudmouthed driver in his chops. Hell, even roosters weren't expected to be up this demmed early.

He slouched in his corner seat after clearing his throat once to vacate the goose-carrying youth who dared to sit there. The kid scrambled to the middle of the cramped bench, honking goose and all.

"I'm told that just a 'air north, th' roads are dry as week-old biskits. I 'spect we'll be makin' good time, keepin' our stops to bare bones."

Bare. Like her supple skin, skin he'd traced in the dark like a blind man.

Bones. Like those delicate protrusions he'd felt along her spine, on the front of her hips, beneath her breasts.

His head ached anew at the reminders.

Never fuck facing forward.

That was his motto. Creed to live by. Kept him from becoming too close, too tempted by any female.

Never fuck face-to-face.

He was an animal and he deserved to fornicate like one.

So why couldn't he shake the memory, however vague, of licking last night's wench from the front? Of nuzzling his nose in the downy curls above her slit?

And why, as God as his witness—a God who should just strike him down and be done with it—couldn't Nash shake the desire to bring the veiled jade now sitting so stiffly across the stagecoach, over the narrow aisle and into his arms? Why couldn't he stop imagining how he'd toss her ugly hat out the window, toss her skirts over her head and fuck her senseless until neither one of them could stand?

Doomed.

He was doomed.

Doomed to stare at her, glower at the man with her. Doomed to contemplate what brought three dissimilar individuals into such close proximity and exactly how soon could he increase the distance.

"No one's gettin' down 'til we stop fer th' midday meal," the driver hollered through the door as he put up the steps and secured it. Behind him, lightning forked across the sky.

"But sir! Me mum's waitin' at th' bend near—"

"Stifle it," Nash told the kid with a desultory slash of his arm. "He's gone. Already climbed up in his seat."

"But me mum—"

"Will have to wait. Why aren't you riding up top?" *Instead of letting your Christmas goose – in August – peck my pantaloons?*

"Mum said I'd be safer inside."

"If you keep your comments and your goose to yourself, you just might." It was a strain to keep the snarl to a minimum.

Enforced captivity.

Nash smothered a growl.

Ever since *she* boarded, the princess had been squirming in her seat. Demmed if he didn't smell her desire.

Made his nostrils flare and his temper burn. How she could be turned-on by the jackanapes next to her was beyond him.

A whip cracked overhead. The goose honked in his ear. The horses jolted forward.

They were off. Finally. What Nash wouldn't give to be loping alongside the steeds. Giving his legs and his lungs the freedom they craved.

Giving his brain and his honked-in ear a rest. Giving his nose a rest.

Away from the stench of her arousal.

Though anything was better than the fear he'd caught off her yesterday.

This morning, fear was gone. Replaced by desire so acute Nash half wished he'd foregone his own relief last night, changed into a damn lion and broke down the door to her room.

He would've seen her without the veil. He would've seen just how molly boy took her. He would've lodged his fangs around her nape and dragged her off. So *he* could have played king of the jungle to her princess.

The family curse had finally done it—pushed him over the edge.

He'd turned into his demmed grandfather after all, a man without thought or care for anyone but himself. The bastard was to blame for the intolerable situation he'd condemned every one of his male descendents to endure. Pity, wasn't it, that one of those African lions hadn't sunk their teeth into his grandfather's neck and ripped it out? Left the old man bleeding to death on the savanna. Oh yes. They had. Pity Grandfather had been rescued and healed. The old man should've been left to rot.

And when had Nash become so bloodthirsty?

When Erasmus found true love? Or perhaps when a demmed pig and her dandy boarded the coach?

Her personal fragrance kept wafting past his nose. The alluring scent making flashes of last night's wench come to mind. The parts he could remember. Some of it was a blur. It happened like that whenever The Change got too close—made reality and the memory of his actions recede.

Self-preservation possibly?

The whiskey probably didn't help either.

So where was his foggy brain this morning when with every swish of her shoulders, every flick of her gloved hand, something about her kept niggling the back of his brain?

She fluffed out her skirts, rearranged her dainty feet.

Her scent slammed into him so strongly Nash knew he had to be imagining things. That or completely losing his mind.

Because for one brief second, he actually entertained the idea that *she* was the wench who had come to his room.

Then he heard her sniff of disapproval, saw the way she patted the arm of the redheaded fop and held his pompous hat firmly on her lap—a different one today, but no less expensive-looking. All the while keeping her veiled face averted from Nash's. As if simply looking at him through that bloody netting would corrupt her pristine person.

Hell would freeze before an uppity, refined miss like this one touched *him* of her own accord.

Love not a gaping pig. Shylock had that right and Nash better remember it. *Love not...*

His nails twitched. Just once, it would be such a relief to allow himself the luxury of Changing. Teeth to fangs. Skin to fur. Nails to claws.

He'd claw that damn hat right off her head. Claw the damn goose right out the window.

Demmed female! He could tell it was going to be an interminably long day.

And then, bloody fucking hell—as if the heavens were punishing him for existing—it started to rain again.

His cock insisted it was going to be a hard day as well. Excruciatingly hard.

She made a little mew of a cough, one that caused the veil to quiver in front of her face. Then those gloved fingers began tapping the brim of the beaver just as her slippered feet began tapping against the coach floor.

Without thought, Nash immediately scooted his leg forward and trapped one of her bobbing feet between the side of the coach and his booted foot.

She tried to yank it free and he only pressed harder.

The growl he'd been trying to subdue for minutes turned into a purr of supreme satisfaction. Nash crossed his arms, snuggled back into *his* corner and feigned sleep.

Then he set his mind to the task of conjuring as many words as possible from the letters P-I-G-P-R-I-N-C-E-S-S.

* * * * *

A quandary. That's what Mary would call Laney's current predicament. A vexing quandary.

But a refined vocabulary and polished manners certainly weren't sufficient to see her out of *this* predicament.

Ever since being passed off from one unreceptive relative to another, until finally landing in the lap of the aunt who sold her, Laney had realized that acceding with others' wishes always proved easier than voicing what she truly wanted.

When a person didn't complain, didn't speak opposing thoughts—no matter how much they might think them—other people tended to overlook them, not take much notice.

Being overlooked—meekness, one might call it—proved a beneficial trait to cultivate, she'd learned, especially since reaching the point in her life where she no longer *wanted* people to notice her.

Men specifically. Ones like George John, who pinched when they passed, leered when they looked.

Much as *he* was doing now from across the coach. Only the heated lust she fancied she saw gleaming from her stranger's eyes didn't make her want to duck and cower. On the contrary, after last night, Laney wanted to preen and crow.

Crow?

For what? His *cock*?

She stifled a smile at that admission. True though it might be, "ladies" weren't supposed to think such words.

Ah, but she was playing a mistress. And she could think them all she wanted.

Behind the safety of her veil, Laney allowed her grin to bloom across her face.

What might his cock look like? Only having Mr. Tate's limp member to compare, she was at a loss. Oh, but she was curious. Vastly so.

She'd seen erect stallions, mating dogs and sheep, but not a *man's* solid erection, not the way nature intended them before a man mated with a woman. And though she'd certainly felt one last night, she still hadn't *seen* it...

As if aware of her secret thoughts, the particular one across from her pursed his lips, furrowed his brow and scowled at her.

Curiosity once roused was difficult to contain Laney was discovering, because regardless of how often he disavowed any interest in her or her indenture, she couldn't stop herself from imagining how wondrous it would be for her vision to come true—to have his *love*.

Neither could she stop herself from imagining how his penis might appear when aroused.

Penis, pecker, prick. Hair-splitter, bum-tickler. Sugar stick. She'd heard them all by the time she was thirteen. Heard them, but hadn't seen them. Nary a one. Until Mr. Tate's.

And that thought cured her curiosity faster than the rain was dripping in through the crack in the door.

Until the next time she caught the stranger contemplating her hat.

And once again her rebellious mind was off, contemplating *his* cock.

* * * * *

Nip. Pips. Sire. Gin. *Gin*. Now that was a good one.

Rip. Sip. Ring. Sing. Ping. Pipe. Sin.

Sin?

Was his brain trying to tell him something?

If he didn't *nip* this little fascination in the bud, he was sure to *sip* some *gin*, commit a *sin*, and *sire* a babe. That would surely put a *ring* in his nose.

Maybe one on her finger.

Damnation!

Might as well hit his topper with a *pipe*. Make his noggin *ping*.

Ping! *Ping*!

Bloody hell. What was he doing?

* * * * *

Thirty-three minutes elapsed...

Pie. Pies. Sir. Sirs.

Too easy. Time for some more complicated pondering. Of the multiple-letter sort.

Rig. Rigs.

Just warming up.

Rein. Reins. Reign.

Hmm. If he could *reign* over The Change, maybe buy a *rig*, some horses to *rein*...

Peg. Pine. Pier. Pen. Pin. Pigpen. Piss. Pisser. Pier.

Pier? Wait. Already done. *Concentrate, Nash*. More letters...

Pierce. Piercing. Price. Prince. *Penis*.

Well bat him straight to hell because now all he could think of was playing *prince* to her princess, *piercing* her *pisser* with his *penis* and wallowing in a fiery *pigpen* in lieu of the pits of Hades. Someone should *peg* his *penis* to a *pier*. With a *pine pin*.

Is that the *price* he paid for his continued mental meanderings? Pointless pontifications?

What was the price for indentures?

* * * * *

Eighty-seven minutes after that...

Nice. Ripe. Inspire.

Spice. Spine. Siren.

Oh God, he'd wager half the gold in his boot her *ripe* breasts were worthy of any *siren's*. *Spicy*—he allowed himself this small modification—to the lips. More *inspiring*—this one too... Nash was beyond desperate, couldn't set his mind on anything else. Perhaps this is what came of having one's penis pinned to a pier with a pine peg?—than the *nice spine* of last night's wench.

Nash cringed, searching for a way out. Vowels! He hadn't yet exhausted vowels.

Ice. Ire. Iris. Epic.

Mayhap, if there were a God, the goose would lean over and peck out his eye. Eat his *iris*.

His beleaguered brain backtracked. Cringed.

Cringes. And yet another one for the ever-growing *epic* list...

* * * * *

"Nipper!"

The stranger snapped his fingers and muttered under his breath. All morning, Laney had suffered through his unintelligible prattle.

Epic cringes being the most recent utterances.

They'd just stopped for their third team and were jangling forth on the soggy roads at an alarming pace. Alarming not only for how fast the horses were clipping along, but also for how much sooner a journey of this speed would reach its end. How much sooner *she* might reach her *end*.

Dire consequences indeed.

But the events—or rather, the *non*-event—of last night overshadowed all else.

How could it not? When the stranger across from her kept peering from beneath dusky, thick hair that perpetually fell into his face. He wouldn't even flick it away, acting as if the strands right in front of his eyes didn't bother him in the least. But they

bothered Laney. She continually had to stifle the compelling need to reach across the seat and brush his hair back so she could see him clearly, and if that wasn't the height of insanity, she didn't know what was.

Nothing had changed since yesterday. Well nothing, save different passengers, that and a new set of rain clouds flirting with them the entire day.

Reginald still tipped his flask at regular intervals, oblivious to the missing hours from last night.

Laney still harbored an acute fascination for the man who had touched her intimately just hours before. A fascination that had more to do with his own confusing contradictions – from tender to intense, from caring to cad – than her own mind-defying visions.

Intimate encounters and arousing visions aside, Laney had no choice but to trust her intuition. Something about this man...he *had* to help her. He would help her. No matter how off-putting his manner in the light of day, she wouldn't give up until he agreed to buy her, even if she had to deceive him again to do it.

And shouldn't she feel the least bit naughty for how excited that prospect made her?

"Press. Pressing. Resign." The last was groaned and he finally did flick his head, only to knock the back of it into the coach and wince.

She opened her mouth to apologize and swiftly covered her lips. Heavens. She couldn't admit to knowing he carried a bruise of her doing on his stubborn, rotten skull, now could she?

"Resign. Resign. Resign." Each hissed word was accompanied by an increase in the heat of his eyes, the searing attention he directed across the coach *and right at her*. An increase with the ferocity with which he smacked his cranium into the coach. Mayhap he really was crazy?

If so, then she was equally crazy for caring about what troubled him so.

But then, hadn't Mum always said Laney *was* crazy?

* * * * *

"'Ere! Stop! Right 'ere!" The boy scrambled to exit the moving coach while maintaining his hold on the startled goose. "Stop!"

Flapping its wings, the honking beast had certainly claimed the stranger's attention away from her, allowing Laney the first full breath she'd had since boarding the coach.

"There's me mum!" the child screeched, waving furiously out the window. "Stop th' coach! Stop!"

Feathers flew. Followed by a flurry of colorful curses.

"Mum!"

Reginald roused and spilt what remained in his flask – which wasn't much – in his lap. Laney held back a laugh.

"Stop th' coach! Pleeeeeeeese!"

"Stop the goddamned coach!"

The stranger's voice must've reached the driver. Either that or the horses' ears, because they jerked to a halt so fast all of the passengers riding forward were thrown into the opposite seat.

Which meant that Reginald had a lapful of liquor, yelling child and squawking goose.

And Laney had a lapful of stranger.

The stranger had a handful of breast.

And Laney wasn't laughing anymore.

* * * * *

Reginald used the unexpected delay to empty his bladder at the base of a nearby tree. A bird on a branch above used the disturbance below to empty his bowels.

Most of the passengers, those inside and riding up top, saw the unplanned halt as a fortuitous occasion to stretch their legs.

The child used the stop to greet his crying mum.

The driver to complain to anyone who would listen.

The goose to peck a few ankles.

Laney saw the empty coach – save two – the most opportune opportunity to plead her case.

As for Nash? After suffering his own word-centered wanderings, he saw this as a prime time to make *her* suffer.

"Please," she entreated the moment they were alone, "you must help me."

"Who says I have to do anything of the sort?"

"Your honor!"

"That's assuming I have any."

"You must, buried somewhere within that ill-kept sleeping-your-life-away façade."

"Tut. Tut. Accusing me of sleeping my life away? 'Why then should the sleeping man should stir?'" he misquoted quite appropriately, Nash thought. "Do you not know any better than to insult the hand you've asked to buy you? I am curious on one point, though..."

She leaned forward eagerly, as if expecting a white knight to come charging forth from his pocket. Nash shifted, felt the corner of Shakespeare dig into his ribs and only ground the book in deeper. He deserved it for piquing her interest but still couldn't stop himself from inquiring, "Would he really defend your honor in a duel?"

"A duel? Whatever makes you think —"

"He as much as challenged me yesterday. For my own honor," Nash pondered out loud, fingering his jaw, "I really shouldn't have backed down. Should have taken the opportunity to blast a hole through his fancy-dressed gullet."

"You'd do that?" she breathed on a happy-sounding squeak. "For me?"

"Hell no. That would equate to me expending effort on another's behalf and why would I bother myself to do that?"

"But you — I've seen you..."

It was difficult to bluff continued disinterest. But Nash was determined. He relaxed his shoulders and plucked a feather off his thigh and flicked it in her direction. "Yes? Just what have you seen? Me coming to your aid? I think not."

"Your eyes — they glow!"

She was grasping. He could tell. Grasping at that flying feather in front of her face just as she was grasping at a convincing argument, one he'd buy. Too bad he was fresh out of goodwill, if not coins.

"What of it? Glowing eyes certainly do not equate to Good Samaritanship in my book. Or perhaps you are reading a different volume?"

"You should help me on principle!"

"*Principle?* P-r-i-n-c-i-p — Damn. No L."

"You are the most infuriating man!"

"Thank you. I suppose we must deduce that you inspire me to greatness. *Inspire?* Did I —"

"Yes," she huffed. "You said that word over an hour ago, along with a hundred others that made absolutely no sense whatsoever."

"A hundred?" He sighed in satisfaction, hearing the sheer vexation in her truly lovely voice, seeing that bound-up-tighter-than-a-virgin's-morals bosom of hers heave with fiery indignation. "Hmm. I only counted ninety-seven. Must've lost track —"

"Oh, you odious man! You...you..."

"Yes?"

"You *swine!*"

"Tut, tut, Princess. Name-calling really doesn't become you. By your own admission, you belong to that fine figure of a man." Nash waved toward the open door of the coach where molly boy could be seen frantically scrubbing at a spot on his hat. "You'll need to devise a plan to save yourself from his nefarious clutches. Trust me, I'm not your man."

But then why did he suddenly want to be? Insane! She was still hiding behind her damn veiled hat. A different one today, but just as ugly. Couldn't even tell what color her hair was, much less her *irises*. All he had to go on was that cultured voice — now strident with irritation — her astonishing persistence and those glorious tits.

* * * * *

Singer. Singers. Singe. Singes. Sipper. Sippers. Sipping. Spring. Springs.

Two hours later, he was still at it. They'd stopped for lunch, this time at a nondescript tavern and coaching station along the route.

Nash chewed and swallowed, chewed and swallowed. But he couldn't stop the words from forming.

Icing. Icier. Irises. What color were hers?

Come *spring*, might he be *singing* for his *sipper*, having his brain cells *singed*?

Sipper? Hell, he meant *supper* – which hadn't even made the bloody list.

Nash ran an exhausted hand over his face. Exhausted because he'd kept it clenched all morning to keep from wringing the neck of first the goose then after it was gone, the dissipated dandy across the coach every time he spoke sharply to her or made a threatening move that caused her to flinch.

Even when the redheaded fribble was being his polished, polite self, Nash had to fight the urge to plant the man a facer.

Right now, the couple sat directly across from him on the other side of the plank table – why couldn't he get away from her? – digging into their own meals, knowing that time was limited even though the food was plentiful.

Nash swallowed and turned his plate a quarter turn to the right, ready to consume the remaining serving. He always did that – ate clockwise around his plate. He wasn't a picky eater, he just ate in a picky manner. Some chuckleheaded notion that just about the only thing in his life he could control and have any say over were his meals. Well that, and how he took his women.

Plowing his fork through the chunky stew, Nash was preparing to take a bite when Hell froze. So did his actions.

"Don't eat that," she whispered quietly, for his ears alone.

Startled more by the heat generated by her gloved fingers perched atop the back of his hand than by the spoken command, Nash's fork clattered to his plate and he looked up, surprised to find Fribble staring at his own plate, hand on his stomach, a slight green cast to his face.

Not a second later the man practically tripped over the bench in his rush to escape outside. In a blink, he was gone. Gone, along with most of the other passengers.

"What?" Nash questioned. "Did I miss the call to move out?"

"No, but I assure you, you do not want to eat that."

When she spoke, the puffs from her words ruffled the veil with every syllable. She removed her hand and pointed toward the stew. "Not even a bite."

"I don't?"

"Trust me. You don't."

And if that didn't make him a noddy after participating in the queerest interaction on record, Nash didn't know what would, because for some strange reason, he did trust her – at least on this, seeing that the entire serving of stew was still plopped, congealing, on her own plate while Fribble had apparently eaten all of his. A quick glance down the table confirmed that every plate sans stew was missing its passenger.

"Why do you wear a veil?" The words were out before Nash could remind himself he didn't care. "The rest of you isn't shrouded in black so you obviously aren't in mourning."

Her shoulders lifted in a noncommittal shrug, but he saw how her hand shook when she reached for her roll, the last remaining item on her plate. Other than the stew. Needing to know, he couldn't stop himself from asking again, "The veil? *Why?*"

She balled her hand and jerked it away from the bread. The monstrosity atop her head tilted back an inch, as if she were staring at him. "*Where* are you traveling?"

So she wanted to play tit for tat? "Very well. Away from London, as far and fast as I can go," he shared truthfully. "The veil?"

Her hesitation was just short enough to make him think she wasn't fabricating a lie. "It's one of the few independent choices I make that Mr. Tate still allows. Why *away?*"

"Because..." His hesitation was probably long enough to cause her to question whether he was going to respond at all. "I did something in London I'd rather not face. Not this decade anyway. Why do you stay with him?"

"I told you..." She lowered her voice when the last remaining passenger stumbled for the door with his hand over his mouth. "I'm indentured to him."

"You don't look like any servant I've ever seen."

"And you may not pose another question until answering one of mine. Something illegal?"

"Morally, if not legally, yes. How long has he owned you?"

"Thirty-six months and eight days. Are you saying that you don't have any particular destination in mind? You'll go wherever the stagecoach takes you?"

"Where are you *two* heading?" Her detailed response had almost left him speechless. But not quite. "I'll be sure to disembark before we get there."

Nash hadn't meant to be so hurtful. It just came out. The beast in him, only no excuse this time, not after satisfying himself sexually as he had the night before. Just because he wasn't in a position to save her, *not* that he wanted to, didn't give him leave to behave like an arse.

He opened his mouth to apologize but she beat him to it, saying "Odious man!" yet without any true heat.

He apologized anyway. "Pardon me. Defensive reflex. There's something I intensely dislike about talking to a wavering veil instead of a breathing, blinking woman. Or maybe I just take umbrage at being lumped on the head."

"That was an accident!" she said defensively, then, "What are you running from?"

"Not what. Who," Nash answered, barely keeping the satisfaction from showing on his expression, even though it was technically his turn to ask. At least he thought so. He was having the devil of a time just keeping up with their exchange. He hadn't felt so exhilarated since...ever.

"Who?" she persisted. "If you're not in trouble with a magistrate or a runner, then why leave?"

As if he'd tell this impertinent, veiled *servant* he was running from *himself*.

Nash grunted, thinking hard. Unknowingly—he'd stake his life on the "unknowing" part—she'd given him a very large piece to a very strange puzzle. A piece he was still pondering. "How much is your indenture?"

She squeaked. She actually squeaked and her gloved hands joined each other atop the table, tapping out a celebratory tune. "You'll buy me?"

"Didn't say that. Just asked how much. As much as a horse?"

"You'd have to take that up with Mr. Tate. I've no idea the terms he negotiated with Mrs. Michaels or how much he's in a position to demand now," her words were tripping over themselves in her haste to answer. She leaned forward and said earnestly, "I didn't care when I was younger and he wouldn't tell me now if I asked—trust me, I have. Now please, won't you tell me *who* you're trying to escape from?" She wouldn't let it drop, would she? "Why are you running? Please tell me."

What, did she think that gave them something in common? "What does it matter?"

"It doesn't, not really. I just thought it prudent to confirm that you aren't wanted for murder or anything dastardly like that, seeing as how I'm putting myself completely under your command."

And now he'd gone and given her false hope. False because he'd no intention of buying her damn indenture.

"Murder doesn't sit on my branch of the family tree, at least not directly. But don't go getting your hopes up—"

"Why not? You're truly my only hope."

Annoyed with her, with himself, with the entire bloody situation, Nash reached across the table and snatched the uneaten roll off her plate. He tore it in half before attempting to dissuade her misguided trust. "My *past*, Princess. My past. I'm trying to outrun my past, though I don't anticipate my future being significantly better, so you best not pin your hopes on a wanderer, one who keeps searching the continent for oblivion or forgiveness. Finding neither."

She unclasped her hands and slid them across the table, stopping just shy of touching him again. "That sounds like a very sad existence."

And why hadn't he shoved the entire roll in his mouth and shut himself up earlier? He crammed in half and spoke around it, purposefully eating like an animal. There had to be more than one way to discourage her. "At least it is one," he choked out, "more than I can say for my cousin."

"Would you talk to Mr. Tate?" He heard the sound of a million dreams, all centered on him.

Pitiful Princess. Didn't she have anyone better to hang her hopes on? He swallowed. "How'd you know about the food?"

She scooted back and turned her head as if glancing at the door. Amid the renewed patter of rain, an unappetizing chorus of retching could be heard in the distance. No specialized feline eardrums needed, either.

"The food?" he prompted when she remained silent.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," she answered evasively.

"You'd be surprised at just what all I will believe."

But it didn't really matter. None of it did...

Whether she'd spiked everyone's plate but his, which he doubted.

Whether she had a crystal ball and could see the future – when pigs wore tiaras!

Whether she had the face of a pockmarked gargoyle...

None of that counted worth beans. Because that earlier touch on the back of his hand, the one halting him from eating his stew, it had told him more than a year's worth of cryptic remarks ever could.

With that innocent touch, combined with her body's not so innocent response to their exchange and her earlier slip, Nash was mentally putting together what had turned out to be a very intriguing puzzle. He leaned back, dusted off his hands and stared at her hidden face unblinking. "I smell your desire."

That monstrous hat tilted to the side. "What?"

She'd returned to squeaking.

"I said, I smell your desire. And if I'm not mistaken – and I'm not – I tasted it last night."

Chapter Five

The Very Necessary Necessary and the Illuminating Lack of Candles

"I beg your pardon?" Laney must've misunderstood. Because they were getting somewhere—she *knew* it. The handsome stranger was on the verge of buying her indenture from Reginald, she could just feel it. But—but...*what* had he said?

He couldn't have said what she thought she heard. Impossible. Improbable. Totally implausible.

Incredible. That he was sitting across from her calmly polishing off the roll she'd been saving for dessert and considering saving her from a fate worse than death. Well actually, the fate of *death*.

"I must've misheard. What did you say?"

Eyeing her as if he could see all of her secrets through the black netting, he made a great show of picking up the remaining half of her roll. Then he popped it into his mouth and chewed thoroughly, s-l-o-w-l-y, masticating every doughy morsel to a pulp before swallowing—taunting her without words. Making her wait, the bastard. He held all the cards and he wanted her to know it. "Well?"

He took his time swallowing again. And again. She watched the contortions of his mouth caused by the motion of his tongue searching out every last speck of bread over both his top teeth and bottom, as he gyrated his jaw and cheeks, all the while staring at her through her protective veil as if it were invisible. As if she were anything but.

Blatantly on display. That's how he made her feel. That and as if she were poised to fall over a cliff.

"Well?" Laney fought the urge to stomp her foot. Or kick it into his shin.

He lifted his ale, took a big gulp, swished it around his mouth, and finished up with a hearty swallow and an open-mouthed, "Ahhhh."

Just as she was cranking her foot back to let it rip, he grinned at her. "I had my head between your legs last night, licking your juicy cunt, didn't I? M'law-dee?"

Laney sputtered. She gasped. Her foot plonked back to the floor with a thump.

"Had my tongue pushed far up your pussy, was swallowing down your sweet honey while you rode my face and screamed. Screamed 'm'lawd!' and poured yourself out over my mouth."

He hadn't spoken to her this way in her vision. But his wicked words painted a more vivid picture than she could ever fathom on her own. One in full color, despite the dark night in her memories. One that had her heart pounding and her mouth panting...her cunny pulsing.

"And judging by the scent of your renewed desire, your pussy is just as juicy now, maybe more so, and you want me there again." His voice hardened. "Don't you, wench?"

Laney squeezed her thighs together.

"Ye damn whoreson!" she cried, abandoning every elocution lesson Mary had ever given her. "An' so what if I do? It ain't fitten table conversation, or did you leave yer manners in my muff along with yer tongue?"

The sound of her voice rang loud in the empty room. Echoed around the hollows of empty benches. Echoed within the empty hollow of Laney herself.

A true lady always moderates her vocabulary and speaks in a most becoming way. One of Mary's earliest teachings rose in her mind. One she'd just discarded like a sack of stones someone dumped in the Thames.

Gads, he'd never want her now. And who could blame him? Illiterate street urchins and uncouth street whores were a groat a dozen. Her countenance and her comportment—one thanks to God, the other thanks to Mary—were all that Laney could claim that set her apart.

And now she didn't have either of those anymore, not in front of this stranger. "Now look what you've gone and done, you uncouth cad of a croissant stealer! You made me go an' ruin it all!"

Laney pushed to her feet. "Now I'm goin' ta die 'cause of you. You an' your devil tongue! Crude and coarse, that's all ye are, steppin' on lady's dresses, stealin' their desserts. Wish to God I'd never...never..."

She started toward the door but he stood and caught her when she rounded the table. *Intense*, that was all she could think.

He was so intense. He clasped her wrists and pushed her back against the table's edge, hovering over her.

"*Die?*" The word slammed through her veil like a bullet. "Come now, Princess, save the dramatics for the stage. For that's what you are, isn't it? An actress."

Laney tried to wrench free but he only tightened his grip, transferring both her wrists to one of his hands. He brought the other one to the bottom edge of her veil. And stopped.

She held her breath.

"You an actress?"

"No."

The finger ran along the veil's lacy edge. "But your accent..." Directly in front of her face, his long, blunt-tipped finger crept to the other side. Trapped. For the first time since she'd donned the mask as protection, Laney felt trapped behind it. Again and again, his finger zipped across the edge then slowed to a crawl. Tormenting her. As were his proximity, his words... "The way you smell... The way you sit, walk, *talk*..."

She gulped and her breath let out in a whoosh. "Until she moved, my friend Mary was employed at the Young Ladies Improving Academy. On her half Sundays, she taught me to speak properly, to write. To compose and comport myself like a lady." Laney's eyes tracked that finger. What was he waiting for? "In exchange, I made her hats."

"I could rip this right from your head, expose everything you're hiding —"

"Please, *don't*..."

"But I'll indulge your delusion of privacy. For now."

He dropped his hand. *To her bosom.*

"You lied to me," he growled, and Laney saw that his eyes were glowing again.

"Not —"

"You did. By action if not by word." He mashed his palm over one breast and Laney jerked away, the uneven tabletop grinding into her buttocks. "Why?"

"I..." Laney felt her traitorous breast push back—into his hand! "I—I *need* you to buy me. It's not safe for me to remain with Reginald. He's becomin' dangerous. When you..."

The jingle of horses passing by the open door snagged her attention. Anyone could walk in, but judging by the moans and shouts, not to mention the faint smells that had Laney's nose wrinkling, everyone was occupied elsewhere.

He stepped closer, brought his legs right up to hers, bent at the knees and leaned in, twisting his body until his erection wedged itself between her clenched thighs. Then he slowly straightened, dragging his stiffened cock until it snuggled into her stomach. Laney's every muscle strained forward in response.

"Go on," he said, moving his palm in a slow caress over her entire breast.

"When...when you said no, I thought..."

His hand tightened painfully. But it felt so good. "Thought what? To trick me? To deceive me into buying you?"

Laney moaned.

"Is that what you meant to do?" he asked again with a hard edge to his voice that corresponded to the hard way his fingers massaged her breast.

"No!" Laney moaned louder.

"No?" He released her breast only to close his hand around the other one.

"No." He shifted closer and her cunny ached anew. "No. Oh God. Yes! I thought if I could satisfy you as good as a whore you would have to secure and pay nightly, then I could convince you to buy me from Reginald and you could have me any time you wanted."

"Any time?"

Laney jerked a nod. "At least until —"

And just like that, he was gone. He'd stepped away, released her, but left her limp and panting. Collapsing backward into the table for support.

"Until when?"

"Until my indenture expires or possibly beyond because I've seen..."

"Seen what?" he demanded when she faltered. "That's the second time you've mentioned seeing something. What are you, a professional eavesdropper?"

Laney wasn't sure how much to confess, not yet. While she was trying to decide, while she stood there, her body yearning for his, her mind a jumble, the coachman stuck his head in just long enough to holler, "We're movin' out! Can't waste any more time 'ere!"

As if the interruption interrupted his own interest, without another word—or touch—her stranger turned and stalked to the door.

"Wait!" Laney rushed forward, her entire body a throbbing mass of *want*. "Please don't leave me here with—"

He whipped around and snared her in place with those heated ember eyes. "Convince me again. *Tonight*. If you're going to play the whore, I want another performance." He stepped close and breathed the next words directly into her veil. "But know this, Princess—this time there'll be no fake accents between us, *no* clothes between us, plenty of light and no goddamn hat!"

* * * * *

"Uhhhh. Uhh. *Aaaaaaa*." The shit glided from Reginald's ass, burning on the way out just as it had on the way in.

Damn. He should never have eaten the venison stew, not after realizing Eleanor wasn't touching hers. But the stuff had a spicy jolt that fired away the concerns mucking his mind. So he kept at it, bite after bite, and by the time he'd seen her warn the stranger, it was already too late. Reginald was on his second helping.

Remembering how Eleanor touched the other man, knowing she was likely gazing at him even now with that moonstruck expression she'd worn around *him* when Reginald had first met her only made the crap burn hotter.

Oy! His arse felt chapped. He hadn't hurt this much since the first time he'd —

"Uhh." He bit down on the grunt, hearing the next person in line throwing up just outside the door.

Where was privacy for making a deuced diarrhea deposit when it was needed?

God. He hated hearing people vomit. The sound alone was enough to make him sick. Before he knew it, *he'd* be the one shitting through his teeth.

How he hated using public privies. But it did beat squatting. In the rain.

If he had the strength, he'd skewer George John for making him undertake this deuced journey. No, skewering was too good for his domineering, holier-than-thou brother. A bloody wound wouldn't make him suffer sufficiently.

The fiercest cramp yet seized Reginald's stomach and he bent double, groaning.

Hell and the devil, he had half a mind to simply marry Eleanor and be done with it. No he didn't—have half a mind, that is. He'd just crapped out one lung, along with his brain.

"Kill me now. Just put me out of my goddamned misery," he prayed, looking at the dirty patch of earth between his mud-splattered—shit-splattered?—boots.

Marry Eleanor? Hmm...

That would certainly give his brother a bitter pill to swallow, but not nearly as bitter as the muscle spasms squeezing Reginald's middle. A fresh spurt of gassy shit burst forth, making his eyes water as much as his arse.

He wanted to die.

Men like him—they weren't made for roughing it outside of town, for haring off to house parties with only vague directions and assurances of even vaguer pleasures.

Men like him, Reginald thought, feeling his stomach cramp anew and the unforgettable taste of pre-vomit gathering just below his throat—he swallowed it down and *pushed*, worked the muscles in his rectum as he hadn't in months—men like him, they weren't meant to deal with women like Eleanor.

Frilly, feminine bits of frippery—who had freaky foresight of the future. Such as when she knew it was going to hail and there wasn't a cloud in all of London or the time she told him the butcher had double charged his steward and Reginald hadn't yet received the bill. Devilish queer—her and her weird ways. He'd come to realize too, that she wasn't quite the biddable, docile creature he'd first thought when he'd begun "courting" her.

But she *was* the only female in his possession and that made her precious indeed, worth more than any other. Certainly worth overlooking her little idiosyncrasies, Reginald had told himself once things began to turn sour.

And she was so very beautiful—according to George John at least, who ought to know, considering his vast experience with women.

Ever since Reginald had cleaned her up and dressed her in expensive finery, he'd noticed how every man who came within ear or eyesight fell under her spell. He supposed that's why she'd taken to wearing the veil whenever they went out in public the past few months. Didn't like all the attention she garnered.

On one hand, it angered him that he couldn't show her off more, on the other, a compliant female was better than a contrarian and Reginald had learned giving in on this point had been worth it—she'd finally unlocked her door after the Cheroot Incident and began conversing with him again.

Over the years she'd matured and filled out to the point that it hurt his eyes just to look at her. Kind of how his gut hurt now.

Just as he knew he'd be puking his brains out in mere seconds—if he could stop shitting long enough to pull up his pants—he knew he *should* find her appealing, so why the fuck didn't his cock give a damn?

Maybe that was the problem—she was too much *woman*.

But she was his woman, bought and paid for. And he wasn't giving her up.

But lunch was coming up.

Reginald kicked open the outhouse door and lurched sideways into the drizzle, holding up his pants with one hand, holding his arse with the other while his stomach proceeded to regurgitate lunch, breakfast and however many pints he'd downed since sunup.

Reginald felt positively wretched.

His brow needed to be wiped. His arse needed to be cleaned.

God. He missed Neils.

* * * * *

"You're late." Nash tried not to notice the relief that swept over him when he opened the door to his second-floor room at The White Knight Inn & Tavern and she swept inside. "And you're wearing that...damn...hat."

"No I'm not." She twitched her skirts and walked past him.

Nash avoided slamming the door only by sheer will, but it gave him great pleasure to turn the lock and hear the echoing clink. He swung to face her. "Then, pray tell, what exactly is that nesting on your head?"

God. He was glad to see her—even though he still couldn't, due to the latest monstrosity she wore. Forest green, with midnight netting and hordes of lacy gauze jumbled on top, a wide brim made a nest for the tiny bird perched over her brainbox.

As the evening had progressed without hint of her arrival, he'd begun thinking he'd overplayed his hand that afternoon and wasn't going to have the pleasure of her company—he meant *body*—tonight. Fortunately, he'd been wrong. Unfortunately, her taste in hat wear hadn't improved a lick. "There's a beak hanging over your forehead, bobbing at me."

"This style is all the rage, I'll have you know. I unpacked it earlier while searching Reginald's trunk for his linen sheets. I just finished putting him down for the night. He's feeling absolutely horrible, you know."

"Good." Nash took a step forward. Once another cloudy night had set in, he'd lit every damn candle the room boasted then asked for more. He was getting a look at her tonight. All night.

His window was open, but he'd drawn the curtains, keeping the draft to a minimum. The light to a maximum.

And wasn't it fortuitous, how the midday meal continued to occupy every passenger who had partaken? All but himself and the hat-wearing creature before him.

"His stomach still heaves every hour or so." She began fidgeting with her gloves, pinching the end of each fingertip and pulling sharply, straightening the wrinkles along each finger, methodically working her way across her hand.

Nash liked the thought of the other man in pain. He took another step toward her. "Good."

"That's why I couldn't get away earlier." She swished past him when he came within arm's reach—only because he *let* her—and walked around the bed, past the window and over to the nightstand. "I see you have plenty of candles this evening."

"I do. Take off the hat, madam."

She fluttered nervously. The bird atop her head flittered as if it wanted to fly off—to freedom.

Did *she*? Was that why she came veiled despite his specific order to the contrary?

Was that why, even now, though he could smell her desire once again, she seemed perched to fly away?

Nash consciously halted his advance. Gentled his approach.

He wanted her body with a fire that raged in his loins over and above that of taming the beast within. He wanted *her*. And he was confused as hell about it. "Tell me your name," he demanded. "I've heard the fop call you 'Eleanor'. What's the rest?"

The startled, glass-eyed gaze of the bird jerked to his. He imagined hers did as well. "Well?"

"Eleanor Catherine Buckley, my lord," she said promptly, responding to the authority in his tone. She left off fiddling with the candles and performed a curtsy fit for crazy King George. "But my grandmum and Mary always called me Laney."

Ah, so patience brought reward. "Grandmum?" he inquired lightly.

"Died when I was eleven, my lord."

Nash walked forward, pretended not to notice when she stiffened, and sat on the edge of the bed, close enough to touch her if he straightened his arm. Which he didn't. Not yet.

She was cornered. Cornered in the corner of *his* room. And she knew it.

And he was between her and the door. The locked door.

A flare of possession ran through him. So she wanted him to buy her? To *own* her?

A woman or a horse...

Responsibility was looking better by the second.

"There's no need to 'my lord' me, Laney," he said, intentionally testing her name on his tongue. It felt almost as succulent as her pussy. "I'm a regular mister."

If a man who annually battled the physical urge to change into a lion could be termed 'regular'. "Mr. Nash Hammond 'is your servant's name, fair princess'." After managing to impart that line without much mangling, he performed a mock bow from his sitting position on the bed. "Possibly at your service, depending on how the night progresses."

He chose not to inform her his brother was the Marquis of Blakely. Didn't know her well enough for confessions.

She remained silent. And unmoving.

The six candles he'd lit earlier showed her overly dressed form to perfection. She was a vision. In a pale sage dress, fancier than the typical style—done up to her chin, done down to her wrists—that hung heavily to the floor, hiding those pretty peach slippers apart from when she walked.

Except for that hat and that God-blasted bobbing bird. That hadn't yet stopped twitching.

"Why are you anxious tonight?" *Why do you wear the veil?*

Why me? Why am I the one you chose to rescue you?

"Why'm I nervous? Um... Let me douse the candles and I'll tell you."

Before he could answer, she leaned over and blew out the two on the nightstand. Smoke drifted past the hat, giving Nash the impression that his dreams were soon to follow.

Dreams? Since when did he dream of soft-spoken wenches dressed in pristine finery locked in his bedroom—willingly?

Since forever...

Keeping her back against the wall, she edged past him. Rather than stop her, Nash cleared his throat. "One more. Leave the other three burning."

She squeaked her displeasure but didn't complain, doing as bade. Another flame extinguished. Leaving three. And a host of uncertainty.

At the far side of the room, she swiveled to face him. Gloved hands clenched. Bird unmoving for once.

Silence reigned.

"I'm waiting," he reminded her.

"I saw something today that was rather unnerving. I—it's given me pause, I'm afraid."

He'd let her blow out three candles for that? "Take off your gloves."

At the note of command in his voice, she moved to obey then hesitated.

Three, Nash. Three bargaining chips left. Use them wisely. "Remove your gloves. Blow out *one* more candle then tell me what you saw."

See? He could sound calm. Even with the compelling need to tear her gown off—with his teeth—running rampant through him.

Each of her gloves came off in quick, jerky motions. Then she unexpectedly dropped them on the floor, the unstructured action making his heart catch.

With a puff of air, the candle was snuffed and she responded, subtly making her way to the remaining two tapers—but not so subtly that he didn't notice. "I was in a meadow, one with an ornate gazebo. There was a couple reclining there...in a rather indelicate position..."

"Indelicate?"

"Um...sexual."

Ah. Perhaps at one of their many unplanned afternoon stops, she'd caught someone indulging in an afternoon session of jiggling buttocks. But why that should unnerve one with her experience he still couldn't fathom. "Did you know them? Were they from the stage?"

"Um. Yes. I believe so. One of them at least. What, uh, confused me wasn't so much what they'd been doing," her voice had gone all low and husky, like a thick waterfall that cascaded through his veins instead of blood, "but what...what..."

"Go on."

"Another candle? Please?"

Two bargaining chips left. But he only needed the light from one to see her clear as day. Nash stood, glanced at the pile of unlit tapers next to the bed and smiled. He began unfastening his shirtsleeves. "Certainly. Not yet," he added swiftly when she leaned over, halting her actions. "I need for you to remove your dress first and finish your tale while you're at it."

He saw the smooth column of her neck work when she swallowed. Saw it work again when he tugged his shirt free of his pantaloons.

The bird whooshed a circle when she turned her back to him. "You'll need to do my buttons."

"Certainly," he said again, thinking how he planned on *doing* a lot more than just her buttons before the night was over.

Following her example, Nash shrugged out of his shirt and dropped it to the floor. He walked the short distance to her and raised his hands to the tiny row of buttons that began at her nape. She flinched at his first touch then held herself stiffly.

"Like a raven," Nash couldn't stop the whispered comment.

"What?" She glanced at him over her shoulder and Nash saw that she'd braced her palms against the wall. The sconce in front of her illuminated her profile through the veil.

He fought the urge to yank the offending hat off her dainty head and throw it to the floor. But he'd made too much progress to change tactics now. Beneath the low brim, he caressed the sliver of exposed skin on the back of her neck. "Your hair. There's a strand trapped around the first button. Appears to be iridescent black like a raven's wing.

Since dear dandified Reginald's is redder than his chafed arse must be at the moment, I assume this particular strand is yours."

"Yes," she breathed, and faced forward, her head swiveling on her neck as if it were floating. The bird almost took flight.

Nash began slipping the tiny pearl buttons free, one after the other.

"This afternoon?" he prompted. He would have leaned in, pressed his cock to her arse, but then he wouldn't have been able to reach the buttons near her bum. No matter. The smooth, pale skin on either side of her spine he'd exposed above her shift was worth savoring.

For a while at least.

"Either remove your headgear or start talking, princess."

She tensed. "What has me nerv—I mean, confused, is the, um, large cat that showed up."

"And why would seeing a little kitty make you nervous about coming here tonight?" *If only she knew...*

Before he could tell what she was about, Laney stood on her toes and blew out the candle, plunging their little corner into shadows.

Shadows from the one remaining—lit—taper.

She tugged on her sleeves and slid the dress from her shoulders. A couple of little hip shakes later and it too was on the floor, a billowing puddle of pale green around her stockinged feet. She toed off her slippers and her arousal saturated the air between them.

Anxious or not, she wanted him. Her body vibrated with it and Nash's responded. His ability to calmly barter and bargain was rapidly evaporating, replaced with the need to lift her up, sheath his cock between her legs and strum her cunt until they both heard the heavenly chorus screaming hallelujah right along with them.

For the moment, Nash did none of those things. Hands flexing at his sides to keep from ripping her shift—hadn't he already done that once?—he huffed an impatient breath. "The hat, princess. Take. It. Off."

"The last candle?" she asked over her shoulder, from the safety of that blasted veil. Her not quite nude shoulder.

"Not until you're naked." *And I'm riding your arse.*

His hands went to his pants. Fortunately for her, he saw hers go to the ribbon on her shift. The ribbon that was tied snugly over those glorious tits. God, he couldn't wait to taste them.

She loosened the ribbon and whipped the pale garment from her body the same instant he stepped out of one snug leg of his pantaloons. Then she sped by him before he could stop her—hat, fucking bird and all—and raced to the last candle.

"Don't you dare blow—" Nash took a step after her, tripped over his own damn pants and caught his balance just as she plunged the room into total darkness.

Play with fire. You're going to get burned.

Laney knew it, but couldn't stop herself.

Scrambling across the bed, she blindly reached for the extra candles she'd seen on the nightstand, intent on —

"Woman!" Nash Hammond grabbed her foot and held her back then came down on top of her.

"Ompf!" *Mmmm*. Mad he might be, but hard he definitely was, his body so warm and firm and inciting, Laney didn't know why she'd been so nervous earlier.

So what if she'd had another vision of the two of them in the gazebo? So what if he'd been making her a circlet of daisies and required more, so what if he'd run off to pick some and hadn't come back?

So what if who — *what* — had returned to her moments later had been the biggest, strangest "cat" Laney had ever seen. If one could call it that — a cat.

It didn't look like any feline Laney had ever petted and she'd never attended a travelling menagerie or even once visited the circus, though she'd asked. Evidently fancy outings such as those were reserved for real ladies...or at least real mistresses, according to Reginald.

The color of sunset, with a full ruff around its head, its body shorn of fur but sporting a small tuft at the end of its tail... The creature did put her in mind of one she'd seen in a picture book at the lending library while poring over various volumes with Mary just before she moved away to take up her new post. *Lion*, Laney thought. Animals that lived in the swampy jungles of Africa. Or was it the deserts of Egypt? The mountains of India?

Blighters! She couldn't remember, didn't know that she cared to, just knew that when the animal appeared through the trees, long and muscular, a posy of flowers — of all things! — bunched in its huge mouth...stalking forward as if it were there to claim her, consume her, instead of fleeing in absolute fright, Laney had only felt pride.

So what if its eyes had *glowed*?

She'd returned to her senses and been very frightened indeed. What could it mean? And did the mystery bode well for her salvation or her ruination?

Determinedly, Laney pushed away the apprehension she'd felt all afternoon, ever since seeing the vision after setting the boldly inappropriate assignation with her hoped-for, soon-to-be owner.

Her mind might be confused — she'd been afraid he'd see the fear in her eyes, know she still wasn't telling him everything...so she'd hidden. Hidden behind the stupid hat that even now he was grappling to take off her head — just as much as she was fighting to reach the candles.

Instinct more than anything.

Self-preservation.

What if he saw her face and didn't like it? Laney had always heard she was a pretty child. Had been told she'd grown into a lovely young woman. But her experience with men was limited to Reginald and his experience with women couldn't be much better.

What if Mr. Nash Hammond found her wanting?

He was considering buying the indenture of an experienced whore, not an unintentional virgin.

"There!" He tugged and the hat came free. Along with several strands of her hair.

"Ow!" Laney lunged forward and coiled her hand around the pile of tapers.

She angled her upper body toward the window the same second he did. Candles – and hat – went flying out into the night.

"You didn't!" he accused, as if he couldn't believe she'd actually thrown away his precious candles. Hands no longer fighting with her hat, he fixed them on her shoulders, kept her stomach and breasts pressed into the mattress. "*Didn't* just chuck the rest of my candles outside."

"You *did*!" Laney tried to roll over, to push him off her so she could face him, but his weight felt too delicious for her to make more than a token effort. "You threw out my hat and my little tit to the ground. From a two-story window!"

"Your *what*?"

"My *bird*, you rotten...tit killer!"

He dove his fingers inside the upswept twist of her hair. Willy-nilly, hairpins flew free. Free. That's how Laney felt – practically naked, in his bed, in his arms.

Free. For the first time since she could remember, no one owned her or her happiness. But Laney owned both.

"And good riddance," he grunted, fisting his hand in a wad of hair and tugging sharply.

Laney's head snapped back. She felt his furred chest rubbing over her back – hadn't it looked smooth earlier? A trick of the candlelight perhaps?

Mr. Hammond growled low in his throat and pulled on her hair again, sensitizing her entire scalp.

"You're the gruntingest man I've ever known."

Teeth at her shoulder, he answered, "And you're the most mysterious wench I've ever crossed paths with," then bit down.

"Oh!"

He licked the spot, his tongue rasping over the hurt, the sensual touch rougher, dryer than she would've expected.

"Mmmm, how do you do that?" Laney found that her bum was arching upward, seeking the now-familiar press of his cock, just as her bare breasts were rubbing over the counterpane, abrading themselves on the homespun cotton, but still *aching*...

Everywhere, she was aching. Needing his intentional touch in places he was deliberately avoiding.

"Do what?" His textured tongue licked a trail of fire down the center of her spine.

"Make your tongue so rough? Oh. Mr. Hammond please – touch me!"

He growled a humor-free laugh. "Just Nash. A *mister* doesn't have any place in bed."

He paused and licked over her bottom—long, slow swipes of that amazing, abrasive tongue, blanketing each cheek with extensive forays until every crumb of skin was on fire and craving more. Laney thrummed from the outside in.

"Touch you where?" he asked, finally releasing his hold on her scalp with a gentle draw down the length of her hair until he reached the ends. "Want to give me leave to figure it out for myself?"

She moaned her acquiescence, feeling his surprisingly sharp nails skid over her sides then disappear.

Laney arched upward again, sensed him moving to the spot between her legs—the heated, pulsing spot with *his* name on it—felt his breath puff across her arse, tease her cunny... Heard him kick his pants free...

But still he didn't touch her.

"My breasts, you beast!" she yelled, eagerly rising on all fours and presenting her most private places to him.

His. She wanted to be his. She wanted *him* to own her.

Own more than her indenture. Her body...her heart.

She wanted that tender lover from the gazebo, the one who cherished her with loving words, who treated her like a queen.

But she wanted this man too—the one who growled into her pussy just before he began stroking it with his oddly rough tongue. The one who scraped his sharp nails over her thighs, dug them into her bum and caused little lightning streaks of pleasure-pain to thunder across her flesh.

The one who didn't demure when she thrust herself backward onto his face, yelling, "Give me more! You. Mr. Nash Hammond, you! I need you now. Please..." but who instead bit at her pussy, kissed the quivering flesh one last time and pulled away only to return a second later, hooking an arm in front of her thighs, lifting them off the bed and at the same time pushing her head down against the mattress.

Aligning his cock at her swollen, hungry cleft.

Plying his hard flesh along her pliant entrance. Piercing fingers joined in, reaching around to part her folds, dive between and guide himself home.

Whimpering at his maddeningly slow pace, Laney clutched at her breasts, dragged her own nails over the sensitive flesh, arousing the puckered peaks, and caught her breath when she felt him finally settle into place—nudge past the entrance of her quim and pause.

"Please!" she cried, ramming herself backward onto the wide head of his cock, down the thick shaft. Past the fragile barrier. She bit her tongue to keep from crying out, but couldn't stop her moan of satisfaction.

Gone now, allowing the most intimate parts of her body to surround the most intimate part of his. Laney felt the pain and embraced it, just as her pussy embraced the strong man who'd breached her defenses. Physically and emotionally. For the first time ever...

It was gone, the last shred of her past.

The one that separated women from girls. Whores from ladies.

Laney from Nash.

And she couldn't be happier.

"Goddammit," he roared, jerking out of her cunt so fast he almost tumbled to the floor.

Might as well have — she'd knocked him senseless.

"Virgin? You're a bloody virgin?"

No, he was the bloody one, Nash realized, smelling the acrid odor of fresh blood wafting from his cock. His throbbing, pulsing, eager-for-her-cunny-like-it-was-heaven cock.

"A virgin," he repeated, unable to stop himself. Nash couldn't wrap in his spinning mind around it. "A paid whore — who's a virgin?"

It didn't seem possible. But then, neither was turning into a lion.

Twice now he'd harmed an innocent, drawn blood. Twice now he'd damned his soul.

He was shaking, the primal urge to change driving through him. Stinging his cells. Firing his rage along with his arousal.

Clamping a hand over his cock to keep it off her — *out* of her — Nash struggled for dominion over The Change. He struggled to keep his shape — and will — human.

He struggled for understanding.

"Why?" he roared, trembling from the need to pound into her. "*Kwa nini hukuniambia?*" *Why didn't you tell me?*

Without his restraining presence, she rolled over. An illusion of luscious femininity staring up at him in the night.

That's all he could see — her outline. Her shadow. Her *betrayal*.

That and the glint of unshed tears in her eyes each time she blinked, reflected in the sliver of moonlight allowed through a passing haze of thin cloud, then just like that, *gone*.

Leaving him in total darkness.

Again.

Chapter Six

The Virgin Whore and the Guilty Conscience

Laney sat up, every particle of her being so alive—so excited—she could hardly breathe. “It’s of no consequence, truly.” She reached for him, but he backed away, stumbling off the bed. “It matters not, I tell you. Please do not assume guilt over something for which I don’t hold you responsible. I wanted —”

“Responsible? For you? Never! *La hasha!*”

His words came at her like an attacking viper, the sounds a grating mockery of his usual laconic tone.

His posture was stiff. Unyielding.

When all Laney wanted to do was *yield* to him. Her body. Her heart.

She didn’t understand why he’d backed away, why her being a virgin was such a bad thing.

She didn’t understand those strange words he blasted at her.

She completely didn’t understand his confusing shifts of manner—from playful to abrupt, smooth to rough, gentleman to beast...

Though the vexing contradictions perplexed her greatly, they also excited her as nothing else. None of those trifling concerns could hold a candle to what she did feel—deep inside. That lonely spot that no one had touched since Grandmum died, leaving Laney alone. Alone with her visions and no one to share them with—she’d never told Mary, not wanting to seem peculiar and Reginald didn’t count. Laney only told him things to keep him a little in awe of her. It was the only influence she’d ever had over him.

But with Nash Hammond, beautiful, haunted—hunted?—Nash... He called to her.

What was he running from? What manner of words or actions would it take to soothe his soul? *Something she possessed?* Something within her that she was meant to share?

Laney thought so, had decided her visions were telling her she needed to try. As if perhaps *she* could rescue him from his past just as she needed *him* to rescue her from her future.

At least the one without him in it.

Because confusing visions or not—confusing *man* or not—when he looked at her as he did now...with his eyes deep, glowing coals, Laney could *feel* the echo of the love he’d expressed in her vision, knew it was only a matter of time before the emotion rang true and loud.

But right now she didn't want time. She wanted him! Wanted *his* cock soothing the ache...

"Get back down 'ere and finish what you started, Nash whatever-your-middle-name-is 'ammond! You're not leaving me 'anging a second time!"

Nash didn't budge, but, "*Second. Time?*"

Laney's lower body arched toward him. Why was he staying away? "Yes!" she hissed, pinching her nipples, wishing her fingers were his *teeth*. "Last night you stopped, left me aching. Like I'm aching now."

She saw that he'd bent forward, almost doubled over as if in extreme pain. Laney rolled to her knees and reached for him. "Come back to bed, Mr. Nash 'ammond. Let me take care of you."

"*Unilee mimi? Take care of me?* That's what you think, you deceitful bitch?"

At her gasp, he laughed cruelly.

"Why are you being this way? What are you saying? I don't understand!"

"Course you don't, *jike*. Speakin' in cursed Swahili tongue," he said with an unexpected roar tacked on to the end.

She jumped at his ferocity. Though her body pulsed with fear, Laney didn't think he'd hurt her. Didn't think he could, not the way he was avoiding her. If he wanted to attack, he'd be advancing, not retreating. Mustering courage, she leaned forward and stretched her arm out farther.

"Swahili?" she repeated the strange word softly, hoping to somehow calm him. "Is that—"

"Cursed Swahili, bitch. Cursed bitch!" Snarling, he lurched forward in the shadows and batted away her hand. "That's right, *jike*, you heard me. Bitch. *Jike*." A sobbed snarl rumbled from his chest. "*Binti mfalme. Princess. Princess? God!*" He swayed. "Thinkin' you can set your hideous cap for me, *binti mfalme*, you with your ladylike ways and packaged mystery, and get me to *care?*"

Trembling, she rose off the bed and took a step toward his shadow. "Mr. Hammond. Nash—"

"Get back," he roared, shoving her away. A strange *pfffft* sound came from his throat and he turned from her, falling to his knees. "Back! Back," he cried, and she heard his nails scraping against the wooden floor. "Bringin' it all back, you are. The guilt, the hope...the bloody curse."

Heart in her throat, Laney tugged the quilt around her shoulders and tiptoed toward him. He growled when she got close. Sniffed and snarled, but that was all. She shuffled forward in the near dark and placed a shaking hand to his taut shoulder.

He flinched. Low guttural growls filled the room, but that was all.

She knelt behind him, let her fingers sink into the short, impossible pelt of fur covering his back. Let full awareness sink into her mind.

Her visions weren't the only otherworldly happenings at work here.

He *pfffttd* again, rumbled more of those strange-sounding syllables, interspersed with words she did understand—*Swine... Princess... Curse... Horses... Hats... And Francine.*

Refusing to acknowledge how that last one tore at her insides, Laney guided Nash's bent form until he gained his feet and directed a stumbling, grumbling—previously sober, now somehow soused—man back to bed.

The bunched muscles beneath her fingertips flexed and strained. He kept sniffing the air, rumbling low in his throat and wincing every time she touched a different part of his body.

Finally, he crashed into the mattress with a moan, caved into a tight ball and stared up at her with glittering, pain-filled eyes. She ignored his warning growl and brushed her hand over his forehead, smoothing away the hair that was perpetually hanging in his face, somehow not surprised to feel that it had grown, become thicker. Just in the time since she'd doused the lights—what a mistake that had been!

His entire body was shaking. Laney pulled her hand back, relieved he hadn't snapped it off.

Why wasn't she more afraid?

Because you heard him say he loves you...that you have children together...

"I'm going to retrieve some more candles and ask the innkeeper to fetch the physician." Where had she abandoned her dress? Searching in the darkness, Laney continued, "I'll be back before—"

He lunged upward and pulled her down. "No! Stay."

Behind her, she felt his entire form shivering from within, clashing against whatever demons had him in their grasp. He crossed his arms in front of her, held her tight to his chest, breathed in panting puffs over her hair and spoke haltingly as if pronouncing every syllable of the King's English took extreme effort.

"Don't. Go. Don't. De-serve. Rot. Hell. Stay. Prin-cess. Stay."

Laney placed her arms over his and hugged him back as hard as she could. "I'll stay. But don't you need..."

Scouring her mind for options, she recalled how he'd behaved last night with her, how he'd growled more, become rougher, then turned tame after releasing himself over her bum. "Why don't you use me?" she suggested into the tense silence. "Can you not simply spend your seed once again so you—"

"No!" His arms tightened reflexively, crushing her lungs. Laney didn't care, not when he forced out the rest of his tortured statement. "Choice. Curse. Pun. Ish."

He sniffed her hair, nuzzled below her ear, still quaking with the tremors that rocked his frame. "Stay."

Laney didn't understand any of it. Didn't understand about his curse, what was happening to his body, why he was rejecting the option she presented, why the

universe had directed their paths to cross in the first place. She didn't understand any of it except the part where—somehow—her very presence afforded him comfort.

For the moment, she was content with that.

But come morning, she was demanding satisfaction. Satisfaction in the form of answers. And his cock.

And if he didn't satisfy her with both, she'd bloody well challenge *him* to a duel!

* * * * *

Dreams.

Interesting concept, dreams.

There were daydreams, when someone consciously conjures something they'd like to experience or a pleasant scenario to get them past a difficult time.

There were *dreams*—lifelong ambitions, often kept hidden, secreted inside one's soul either because they seemed too farfetched to ever come true or because they could never be admitted to oneself in the light of day.

Best way to avoid disappointment—or complete and utter devastation—was not to admit what one wanted. Pretend it didn't exist. Then, living in complete denial, a person could *pretend* happiness.

Even if reality didn't come close.

But then...then there were D-R-E-A-M-S. The kind one's mind often creates while the body is slumbering. Nonsensical, viewed in shades of gray, brief flashes of events and people that come together in confusing, complicating ways to entertain the conscience self during the wee hours.

But occasionally, when the stars align just so, one picks the winning horse and has a vivid, slow-moving dream in all its colorful splendor, the kind of dream that leaves one in alt, in paradise, in desperate need to never, ever, *ever* wake up. For then it might end.

Nash was in the thrall of one of *those* types of dreams.

The kind that tantalizes the body and soothes the spirit with utter perfection. The kind that makes a man *want* to sleep his life away.

Sunlight streamed in through the window. He knew it even though his eyes—and mind—were shut tight against the break of day. But the warm rays heated his tired flesh, made him feel new, refreshed. *Relaxed*.

Oh hell, that was an absolute clanker.

Nash's body felt anything but relaxed. When the angelic vision in one's sinful dream has bathed one's brow, one's body—one's cock!—with languid strokes of washcloth and water, when her firm touch has touched everywhere, soul deep... When her lips are even now caressing the length of the proud erection straining high toward heaven, how, *how* can a man be relaxed?

"Puh." A snort of disbelief puffed through Nash's lips. He tried to roll over, sink back into the blissful oblivion that had claimed him deep in the nighttime hours, but something stopped him from moving.

Could it be...the lips caressing his shaft?

Nash came awake with a jolt of awareness. Jarred from the hazy peace that had so recently cushioned him from reality, the abrupt departure into wakefulness came as a shock.

Such a shock that it was a full thirty-three seconds before he mastered the ability or will to move. And in that measly half a minute, a host of astonishing realizations made themselves known.

He was naked and in bed.

He'd spent the better part of the night battling The Change. He knew because he remembered.

Remembered fighting the inborn instinct to turn into an animal.

Remembered crushing down the primitive urges, just as he'd witnessed his brother doing not a week before. Fought to bury them so as not to harm the precious bundle of mysterious and contradictory femininity in his arms.

Nash remembered Laney. Feisty, argumentative, *deceitful* Laney.

He remembered falling asleep just before dawn broke, exhausted from tamping down feral desires to mate, to *own*. Triumphant in his quest to remain human only because he had other desires vying for dominance. Those of caring, interest and...hope.

But there was one glaringly obvious, monstrously gigantic thing Nash *didn't* remember. Giving the black-haired wench leave to suck his cock!

His hips thrust upward, sliding his rod past lips he couldn't see, hidden as they were by her long fall of hair. But lips that were hot and plump and snug against his shaft.

Lips complemented by a tongue that alternated between tentative forays around his cock head with ballocks-blowing suction...

A mouth that Nash wanted to see, to claim. *To kiss*.

He commanded his muscles to sit up. They disobeyed.

He commanded his lips and tongue to tell her to stop. They laughed in his face.

He told his heart to stop stuttering, stop *hoping*...

That insolent organ defied him.

Nash told his hands to release her hair, told his hips to still. Told his dick to stop dancing.

Nothing listened.

Then she started humming and his cock vibrated within her mouth.

"Bloody hell." And now he was dancing to *her* tune.

In. Out. Up. Down.

Fast. S l o w. Fast. S...l...o...w.

Suck. Lick. Hummmmmmmmmmm.

Fast. Fast. Fast.

Take advantage of him while he was asleep, would she?

Declare he hadn't satisfied her? Not once, but *twice*?

Try to trick him by pretending to be a whore?

Well, he'd show her. Show her how a whore deserved to be treated. Show her how a man who walked on the wild side of society minute by minute, ran from responsibilities day by day, and cursed his existence week in and week out took a whore.

Fast.Fast.Fast.Fast.

"No more!" Nash jackknifed to a sitting position. He used his grip on her hair to wrench her mouth away from his dick. Not giving her time to protest—not giving his cock time to either—he pushed her facedown across his lap.

His hand slid over skin like satin. She was nude.

Nude except for the pale silk stockings that caressed her legs. One stopped mid-thigh. The other had fallen below her knee.

His eyes tracked back to the top of her thigh then a hand's width above. A small brown mole smack on her right buttock, just to the left of center. Surrounded by pale, soft flesh...made more noticeable by the creamy stocking just below. The incongruity of that mole did something to him. It made him want to know more about her. What else had she been hiding? But more imperative, at least for the moment...

The sight of those stockings did something to him.

Whores don't wear silk.

The reminder sent his restraint flying. His palm followed.

"Agggghhhh!" Nash brought his splayed hand down on her right cheek, just inches above that damn stocking.

She squeaked and flinched.

His erect cock responded, lurching along her stomach, the action made all the easier due to the glide afforded by her recent open-mouthed kisses.

God he needed to fuck her.

Her!

Laney of the silk stockings and prim reproofs. His hand came down again.

This time her squeak was a sigh. The flinch a quiver.

Laney of the monumental gall—asking him to buy her—and the monumental tits, of which the undersides were even now rubbing against his leg.

His hand came down again. Harder.

Not a squeak or a sigh, but a moan. The quiver, a squirm, inviting more.

Damn her.

Laney of the fancy dress and fancier manners – when she wasn't deceiving him and pretending...

But maybe it was all an act? Take in the country gentleman, get him to *care*, then rob him blind? Pocketbook, pecker and passion. Wallet, wand and will.

His hand came down again. Much harder. Leaving the right side of her arse burning red, fiery hot.

His cock was rocking to the beat of her moans, still dancing to her damn tune.

Nash finally realized she wasn't trying to get up. Wasn't, in fact, fighting him at all, and he stopped holding her down with his left hand and instead applied that one to the task *at hand*.

The task of punishing Laney.

For what, Nash no longer knew. He only knew she had to pay. Someone had to pay.

His left hand slapped her arse. His right moved to her thigh.

He slapped skin. *Pop!*

Heard her moan.

Slapped again. *Pop! Pop!*

Heard her groan.

Spanked her through the stocking. *Smack!*

"Oh...Nash..."

She wasn't supposed to *like* it...

Driven by the demons that rode his soul, Nash pushed her limp form off his lap, rose to his knees and crawled over her.

"Up!" he growled.

She didn't move fast enough so he grabbed a pillow and shoved it beneath her thighs, lifting her, positioning her arse in the air where he wanted it – at his disposal.

With both hands, Nash spanked the rosy flesh, over and over, stopping only when he realized she was leaning *into* the stimulating blows.

Then he saw his fingers and snorted. Goddamn fur was growing on the back of his hands. His knuckles had contracted. Nails sharpened.

Then he noticed what those pointed not-quite claws had done. More importantly, what they'd *revealed*.

Centered between both his "hands", surrounded by eight raised welts across the fleshy lobes of her buttocks, was her delectable anus. Shining like a beacon, calling him home.

Like a man starved, Nash dove in, his tongue licking along the shadowed crevice, going lower, circling the puckered bud...*tasting*.

Breathing in the scent of his lady.

His very own whore-turned-lady.

Whom he didn't deserve.

Attempting to banish the refrain, Nash licked lower, easily finding her swollen pussy ready and weeping for him. Her honey flowed past his lips and over his tongue. Swallowing her nectar, experiencing the eroticism of having her ride his face, *her* pleading refrain finally penetrated his brain.

"Mr. Hammond, please. Please! Nash. *Don't stop.*"

Don't stop *what*?

Wanting her with every fiber of his feral being? Don't stop licking her cunt as if he'd never tasted anything so sweet? He hadn't.

Don't stop dreaming hopeless, stupid dreams?

Don't stop showing her what an animal you really are! Don't stop punishing her...

For making you care!

Nash straightened and curved his palm over his cock.

God. Now *he* was the one wincing. Damn, he was sensitive. A primitive growl erupted when he fisted his shaft with his right hand, bringing it to her crack. Up and down he slid his cock head, from her pouting cunt to her blinking anus.

Teasing sensitive flesh. Taunting himself.

When you should be punishing her.

Nash brought his left thumb to his mouth and sucked it inside. It was the bluntest of his nails, the others already resembling fucking claws. Once moistened, he placed the tip at her anus and pushed against the eager hole. Past the impossibly tight ring of muscles... He forced his thumb in as far as it would go.

Her arse started humping his hand, her pussy seeking his cock.

Punish her, he would. She wouldn't be satisfied this time either! He wouldn't give her the demmed *satisfaction*.

Nash slid his shaft between her legs, coating it with her fragrant juices.

"So you want to act like a whore?"

More of those whimpered squeaks escaped the lady — no, the *whore* — on the bed.

Nash twitched a deaf ear, ignored her moaned pleas to stop the aching and yanked his thumb free, replacing it with his cock.

"Bitch!" he cried, easing his wide head past the narrow opening.

"Whore!" he confirmed loudly when her tight passage sucked his shaft the rest of the way in — as though it goddamned belonged there!

"Lady!" he contradicted himself, realizing how wondrous it felt, riding her untamed, unplowed, *virgin* arse, plunging deep inside that tiny dark hole, expecting oblivion but instead finding infinite light.

"Laney!" He heard his voice shouting her name like a benediction. "Oh God, Laney."

Despite the confusion, Nash could feel every rhythmic wave of her body's contractions along his shaft, found that his own hand was positioned between her legs, massaging her slick pussy, fingering her clitoris as a fresh wash of arousal poured over him...around him. Cleansed him...

Washed away the hate, the despair, the guilt. Washed away his past just as she'd washed him. With her hands. Her mouth.

And again he was fighting his own body, fighting to hold on to the anger and the drive to punish, fighting to find the beast, but finding it all gone.

Gone.

Dissolved in the onslaught of orgasm.

The hand at her pussy parted her flesh in frenzied motions. His cock lunged inside her arse at a frantic pace. His heartbeat pounded furiously and still Nash fought to hold on...too soon. Too goddamned soon.

His ballocks tensed. His butt clenched. His cock strained. His teeth ground against each other to keep from biting her shoulder and he erupted, his seed expelling harmlessly inside her arse. Hope gushing from him just as fast.

"God, Laney!"

And just like that. It was over.

No. It was the beginning.

Instead of his body, Nash fought to catch his breath.

"God," he repeated, feeling every single undulating ripple of her rectum as her body milked his cock. Took every drop of semen he'd released and drank it down. Consumed him. As he had her —

Until finding out she was a virgin.

A virgin whore!

Guilt assailed him all over again, mocking the beauty of the most profound release in memory. Cheapening it.

The viselike grip of her anus tempted him to stay forever, but Nash forced his cock to ease itself from inside heaven and crumpled to the side. Spent, emotionally and physically. His heart rate refusing to slow, he stared at her, knowing he should apologize but unable to speak past the emotion clogging his throat.

Emotion? Or guilt?

Nothing but a deceitful whore, that part of him reminded, the part that didn't think he deserved anything more.

Even now, his taunting recrimination continued, the lying bitch won't look at you, is keeping her head turned.

Afraid to look, he suspected.

Afraid because of what he'd see or what she would?

Afraid because her countenance wasn't all that a female's should be?

Given the glorious body she'd been blessed with, the melodious voice, the feisty, determined package concealed within, Nash knew it didn't matter what she looked like. Not to him.

But if she was afraid of what *she'd* see when she looked at him after last night, after he'd treated her like a priggish savage just now, then... Then there really wasn't any hope. He couldn't alter who or what he was. Lord knows he'd tried.

"Goddammit, Laney!" he howled, so damn frustrated with her—with himself—with *life*, he wanted to bolt out the window and take off running.

Running away as he always did to keep others from becoming close. To protect his heart from falling, protect himself from being hurt. But for once, it was too late. He'd already fallen and, damn his soul, he'd also caused her pain. That alone hurt him.

He curved his palm over her abused buttocks and squeezed the heated flesh with care. "Laney, Laney. What in the hell are we going to do?"

Because he couldn't run. Not this time. Not until he figured out what he was supposed to do with a virgin princess.

Who wasn't.

Chapter Seven

Time for a Change

Laney clenched her sore, tingling bum. Blighters, but that had been *marvelous*. Unexpected, unanticipated, unpredicted and absolutely marvelous.

Who knew that one's bum could be used for such a thing?

Or that something so seemingly childish as a spanking could stimulate every particle of her being until she quite didn't care what Mr. Nash Hammond did with her body as long as he was doing something?

Now it seemed to be her turn to do something, didn't it?

The tiny tremors contracting her quim every second or so were prodding her on... *Yes, yes, yes...* they seemed to say. *Yes, you can do it.* Over and over, her body was urging her mind, *Yes, you can.*

Slower now, but no less breathtaking... *Yes... Yes... Yes... Y e s...*

From puffy, numb lips to throbbing loins and lungs, she was a bastion of sexual repletion.

Y e s... Y e s... Yessssssssss.

She *could* do this, by God. The time for avoidance was at an end.

Gathering every bit of courage she'd squandered over the years, Laney rolled over and lifted her eyes to Nash.

Through the thick veil of her hair, she saw him staring at her and wondered when she'd become so good at hiding.

"No more," she said resolutely, propping herself up. With a swing of her arm, she tossed back her shield of hair and faced him squarely. There were so many things she needed to ask him, to tell him. Her visions, his eyes. Her indenture, his *fur*.

Their future. If there was one.

Though he appeared completely human at present—that perpetual scowl was back and she knew they both had a lot to answer for. Addressing him after what they'd just shared was awkward indeed.

"Mr. Hammond, um..." Her mouth dried up. She wet her lips and tried again. "Nash, I—"

Something banged into their door from the hallway and she broke off, tugging the sheet around her. Not a second later, the top hinge came loose and the door crashed open. Reginald staggered inside brandishing a dueling pistol. "Where's Eleanor? Where is she?"

As she was sitting in full view directly on the bed, Laney thought that a rather overly dramatic entrance on Reginald's part, but then he'd always been one for theatrics. Although he was a costumer's nightmare at the moment. Appeared as if he'd dressed himself blind, his every piece of vibrant hair askew, sticking out at odd angles from yet another fancy beaver, his waistcoat buttoned off kilter, neckcloth untied and – *gasp!* – an unbecoming stain on his jacket. The venison stew?

“‘Ere now!” When the burly innkeeper plowed inside behind Reginald, she pulled the sheet more firmly around her. “Monied bloke or not, you’ve go’ no call to go bustin’ down me doors an’ breakin’ in me rooms!”

Reginald turned the pistol on the innkeeper and thoughts of stage dramatics fled. “Says who?” Reginald asked with that newfound hardness to his voice. “I’ve got a single shot in here that gives me call to do whatever I damn well please.”

The innkeeper stepped forward and attempted to overpower Reginald, and the man she’d previously known to be the unassuming opposite of violent – until recent months, that is – ducked toward his boot and popped back up waving a knife.

When had Reginald started going around armed?

“I’ll ‘ave you arrested an’ brought up on charges, I will!” The innkeeper yelled, jumping back when Reginald aimed for his arm.

The pistol was gesturing wildly between the bed and the doorway as Reginald came farther into the room.

“Simply protectin’ my property, my good man. The bitch on yon bed is mine,” he said all proper-like. Then the façade crumbled and he cocked the gun, aimed the weapon at her then back at the innkeeper. “An’ I’m just taking back what I own. Now leave off or I’ll have *you* arrested – after I shoot a piece of lead in that tiny pea you call a brain.”

To show he meant business, Reginald swiped at the man’s face, the glint of metal flashing between them.

Heavy eyebrows flattened, the innkeeper backed down, backed into the hallway and bellowed from the back of his throat, “You’re payin’ for th’ damages on anything else you break! An’ I want you all outta ‘ere in ten minutes or I’ll ‘ave you *all* brought up –”

Behind her, Nash growled. It was the first sound he’d made.

Already in the hallway, the innkeeper jumped at the gritty noise. “Make that five minutes and no bullet ‘oles!” Cursing under his breath, he wrenched the sagging door shut and stomped off. “Bloomin’ gentry!”

Sheathing his knife but keeping the pistol aimed at the bed, Reginald leaned against the closed door. His lip curled. “Well. If it isn’t Little Miss Innocent.” His eyes took in the bloodstained water in the wash basin next to the bed. “But no longer, eh? Finally got a man to prig you like I couldn’t?” His shoulders seemed to droop then he forced his arm up, stiffening his posture. “Are you trying to ruin me with my brother? Now I won’t know if you’re carrying my brat or his!”

"Your *babe*? Is that what this is all about?" She remembered her dead-body-vomits vision. "You're *trying* to get me pregnant? Of all the preposterous notions!"

"Preposterous? What? Don't think I can do it, do you? Don't think that I'm *man* enough?"

"Oh Mr. Tate, all of this just to prove that you can? What has your brother done to you?" Ready to confront Reginald herself, take his own damn knife and carve some sense into him, Laney started to climb from the bed. Nash's hand clamped down on her shoulder and he hauled her against his chest.

Reginald stalked closer, pointing the gun with a steadier hand than she would've believed possible given the way he'd been drinking lately. "Take your grubby paws off her. And you—don't 'Mr. Tate' me in that pitying voice. I *own* you, Eleanor, and don't you forget it. Now get away from him, get the hell off that bed and get yourself dressed. You're coming with me."

Under Nash's restraining hold, she tensed before responding, "No, I'm not. Never again."

Nash's grip didn't waver. Nor did he speak.

"Yes, you will. We're leaving. *Now*." Reginald sighted in just over her right shoulder. "Let her go. Or I'll let 'er rip, and at this range, I daresay I'll blast your brains into the next room. *Eleanor*. Move *now*."

This couldn't be happening. She couldn't be sitting on a bed, in a sheet, with a red-haired beast in front of her flourishing a gun as if he knew how to use it and a mute beast behind her. One who *hadn't said a word*!

Only hours ago they'd checked into the new inn—from The Black *Bore* to The White Knight Inn—and she'd indulged in more than one implausible fantasy before knocking on his door last evening. *His* door—her knight in rusted armor, the man who was supposed to save her. But who wasn't doing a bloomin' thing.

Laney swung to face him, unintentionally dislodging his hand in the process. "Don't you care?" she shrieked, incensed. "Do you *want* me to go with him?"

Mr. Nash "Frustratingly Silent" Hammond only blinked, staring at her with glittering eyes.

She shoved at his chest, hoping to rile a reaction out of him, hoping to see that she somehow mattered. Other than rocking backward from the force of her action, still nothing.

"Eleanor!"

With the hand that wasn't holding up the sheet, Laney reared back and brought her fist down on Nash's granite chest. "*Well?*"

"No."

"No? That's it? 'No' *what*, you beastly bounder? No, you don't care, or *no*, you don't want me to go— Ohhh!"

Reginald had grabbed a hank of her hair. To keep from losing part of her scalp, Laney scuttered sideways off the mattress. That propelled Nash into action.

Finally, she saw with a wave of relief.

He snarled and jumped to all fours on the bed. He was crouched, naked, ready to spring. “Lve—” He cleared his throat, shook his head with such force it sent every strand of his wayward hair flying. “Leave. Her.”

So he’d taken to grunting again?

Reginald pulled harder on her scalp, dragging her toward the door. Stupid tears filled her eyes. Laney tripped and fell to her knees. Scrambling to get her feet under her, she clawed at his hold. “Lemme go!”

Mr. Hammond jumped off the bed and Reginald aimed the pistol at him. “Stop! One more step and you’re a dead man.”

He kept moving forward. “You think so?”

“I mean it!” Reginald pointed the gun to her temple. Not so steady now, his hand was shaking all over the place. The cold metal of the barrel tapped against her head. *Tat-tat-tat-tat-tat*. Oh Lord. Now she was shaking too. She left off fighting and hung there limply. “I mean it, I do! Take another bloody step and I shoot her.”

“Will he?” Nash pondered out loud, never so uncertain in all his life.

How does a chap rescue a damsel in distress when he himself is *distressed*?

Muddled from too little sleep and too much Laney. Too little sex then too much, and again *too much Laney*.

God. His day lights finally behold the most beautiful creature he’s ever seen and he’s just plowed her arse without a dram of care or finesse.

Not only that, the stunning female expects him to *buy* her and has positively appalling tastes in hats.

Then her soon-to-be *former* owner breaks in, crazed with jealousy...

How could Nash be expected to gather his wits sufficiently to save *her* when he could smell his own fear coming off his body in droves? When he could feel the recently tamed atoms of his being settling back into the normal order of things after the most hellacious night?

But the sight of her—kneeling at that bastard’s feet with that fucking gun pointed to her head... Now Nash was the one crazed with jealousy.

“Mr. ‘ammond...change!” Laney begged. “Please! Be the cat!”

She didn’t need to say his name. Didn’t need to blink or plead with her shining eyes or beg him with her startling words because he already knew.

She was counting on him to save her. And that’s just what he’d do.

Attempts at clear-headed thinking obviously weren’t on tap this morning. Giving in, he abandoned his efforts at cognitive analysis.

Pure animal instinct took over and Nash did something he'd fought against with every cell of his being since turning twenty-five.

Six long years of being strong, of staying in control—of being *alone*—evaporated, and despite all efforts to the contrary, Nash called on *Roho ya Simba*, the Spirit of the Lion, to come to him.

He opened his mind, his body and his heart and implored the universe as he'd never done before, prayed with everything in him that he'd be able to come back to her when it was over. Prayed he wasn't making the worst mistake of his life. Because while his form had wavered between human and feline in the midst of fornicating and fighting the annual Change, he'd never, *never* willingly abandoned his body and embraced the beast within.

How does one give themselves over to that which they've spent their entire adult life combating?

"Surrender!" he called to the fribble—giving the man one last chance.

The gun wavered, but once Laney broke away, Dandy brought it up again, knocking her across the face. "Mine! Now get up before—"

Surrender.

With a roar that would have done his African ancestors proud, Nash gritted his teeth, tensed his legs and gave himself over, changing into the beast in order to save his beauty.

Laney had fallen back from the blow but was kicking out at Reginald, who was gaping slack-jawed at Nash, the gun forgotten at his side.

Nash knew it was happening, sensed an invisible hand pressing down on his head, lowering his body to the floor. Idly, he wondered just what the other man was seeing, but then Nash stopped thinking, stopped...processing. Because all he could do was feel.

Feel the searing burn along every nerve ending. Feel his skin pull tight, stretch and give way. Feel his nails thicken, sharpen, turn into talons. His mouth grew heavy and wide, pointy canine teeth elongating past his lips. Spine lengthening, curving, forcing him downward. Fur growing. Tail growing—what a strange sensation, that. Mane...fluffing around his neck as if to strangle him for taking so long.

His timing might have been off, but he was *on* now. On point to save *his* woman—the only one who had ever seen through to the awful truth lurking within his soul. Seen it and hadn't run screaming from him.

Whiskers twitching, ears flicked forward, Nash swished his tail and pounced, placing himself between Laney and the red-haired molly boy who was even now pissing himself, leaving a puddle on the floor and the stink of his cowardice in the air.

Laney was crying. Her slug of an owner blubbering.

"Wangu." *Mine.* "Wangu!" Nash howled, clueless whether either of them could understand him.

Reginald stumbled back, hitting the closed door. "You – you..." He fumbled behind him for the knob. "You can – have her...have her... George John...won't..."

Nash growled low in his throat, let saliva drip off his fangs. Tried to spit a wad for emphasis but wasn't sure how to control the absurdly long tongue in his mouth.

Laney grabbed hold of his flank. He padded backward, solidly leaning into her, praying she knew he wouldn't hurt her. Relieved to realize he could still *think*.

But the dripping drool was so unlike him. Nash gave his head a fierce flick, flinging the remaining spittle toward Tate.

Blubber boy in turn flinched and groped for the door handle. "Aaaaayyyyyyyyyyy!"

"Mr. Tate," Laney called.

Just when he wrestled the door open, Fribble flicked a panicked glance over his shoulder.

"Don't go there – where you're heading." Her fingers stroked along Nash's spine toward his nape. A ripple of awareness vibrated up his coat. "To that house party. You don't want to go. You don't..."

Halfway across the threshold, the not-so-dandy-anymore dandy paused. "Eh? *You know?*"

From his left eye, Nash saw Laney nod. Tate's face drained of all remaining color – not that there was much left. Seeing that Nash wasn't advancing or tearing into his throat, he sputtered, "You've *seen* it?"

Her nails dug into his fur. "Enough. Trust me, you don't want to go there, do those things. That's not you, none of it. Not the you I used to know."

How could she say that when the bastard had just hit her?

"I have to!" Fribble looked cornered. A rank coward. White livered and pale faced. "Have to...George John –"

"Find Neils. Leave London together. Move to India. The Colonies. Anywhere away. You'll be...happier."

"Happy?" he blubbered, so distraught the gun dropped from his lax fingers. He glanced down, as if surprised he no longer held it. "Happy? *Happy?* Forgot what that's like. Oh, look at my pants!"

"Mr. Tate." Laney climbed to her knees and leaned forward. Nash turned sideways. No way was he permitting her within six feet of the bastard. Crying or not. "Did you mean it?" she asked eagerly. "You'll release me?"

One aghast look at Nash, who snarled for good measure and rose up on his hind legs, paws in the air, just to see if he could – he could – and her no longer dandified dandy nodded with so much enthusiasm his latest hat toppled to the floor. "Y-Yes. You're f-free. Just d-don't let it near m-me."

"I won't, but he won't do –"

This had gone on long enough. Nash padded forward three steps.

That was all it took.

“Sorrrrrreeeeeeee,” echoed down the hall as molly boy retreated. Leaving a puddle.

But more importantly, leaving Nash alone with his rescued damsel.

And one hell of a responsibility.

* * * * *

Good God Almighty. He was never drinking anything other than ale for the rest of his life. And as long as he was making promises, Reginald decided he’d swear off venison stew while he was at it.

He’d heard excessive amounts of liquor could induce fucking hallucinations, but this – *this*...

He’d had plenty of time yesterday and last night to think. Ever since his stomach began gurgling and things started audibly coming out both ends, ever since he began wondering whether each moment might be his last – and wishing more often than not it were – time had slowed to a crawl and allowed all manner of introspection to crawl through his mind. Maybe he’d shit out some of his brains in the privy yesterday, but he could still tell time.

And it was past time to remove himself from George John’s influence, past time to give up his contrived association with Eleanor and past time to get the fuck away from that...that...*thing* in her room. Its room. The thing’s room. Broken-door room.

Reginald barreled into *his* room, evaluating his possessions with a glance.

Ahgghh! Definitely no time to wait for the next stagecoach. His trunk would stay, but not all of the contents.

Money. Eleanor’s papers. His spare beaver – certainly not as fine, but it’d have to do – and his prized snuff tin, the precious gift from Neils. *Neils*.

Pocketing what he’d retrieved and all of the money he could carry, Reginald was back in the hallway and heading downstairs in under a minute.

Time to gallop back to London, locate Neils, beg his forgiveness and catch the next ship across the channel. And if George John didn’t like it – when he received the letter Reginald would write and post only *after* the ship docked – then his brother could go stuff himself.

His chapped arse protested vehemently at the thought of more travel, but there was no help for it. He refused to remain around spooky all-knowing Eleanor and her snarling *pet* of a pussy one second longer.

Pausing at the foot of the stairs only long enough to secure a horse, pay his shot and shove Eleanor’s bloody indenture papers at the frowning innkeeper, Reginald was out the door and on his way before the next shitty thought hit.

How could he gallop to London when he had no idea how to ride a horse?

* * * * *

"Mr. Hammond!" So amazed, relieved, *ecstatic* she could hardly breathe, Laney rushed toward her rescuer, arms outstretched.

"RRROOOOWWWWOOOOWWW!" the feline unexpectedly roared, stopping her in her tracks.

Heart threatening to beat right out of her chest—with fear or happiness, she wasn't sure which—Laney skidded to a halt. Deep down, she knew she shouldn't fear him, but after that monstrously loud fang-baring display, she couldn't stop the frisson of...uncertainty...that zipped down her spine, around her bum then up again, exploding in her stomach.

"Oh my heavens. You're scary when you do that." Laney glanced at the space between them, noticed her toes were exposed. "Oh dear! And I'm still not dressed!"

One furry front leg took a step toward her.

Without meaning to, Laney jumped back and Nash Hammond promptly rumbled another roar.

Laney squeaked and gave him a wide berth. "Yes, definitely scary. But thrilling too, I must confess."

Spotting her dress, she leaned down to pick it up and stood, holding it in front of her. Exactly how did one converse with a shaggy beast? A beast with the most soulful eyes...

Swallowing, she shook out her dress and attempted to pretend as if standing naked in front of a cat—one that was really a man, one who she'd just been thoroughly intimate with!—was nothing more than a commonplace occurrence. "Impossible," she said out loud. "I could sooner stop the sun from rising."

Making a mew of curiosity, Mr. Hammond padded softly over to the busted door and plopped down in front of it like a barricade. A giant feline barricade.

"I shall be happy to talk more when you're, uh, human and not growling," she watched him turn his furry head and wipe his jaw on one shoulder, "or not drooling."

Hearing the words she'd just uttered, Laney couldn't stop an embarrassed laugh from escaping. The entire situation defied explanation. Her gaze kept skittering from the window to the dress she was struggling into to Mr. Hammond.

The sight so filled her with pure amazement, she was making a complete hash of attiring herself, turning every which way in her muddled efforts. Accidentally bumping into Reginald's abandoned beaver brought home the bewildering events of the morning. Giggling nervously, she commented, "Did you see how his hat fell off when his jaw started working like a hooked fish? The look on his face?"

Her skirts finally swished into place and nose wrinkling, she step-skipped away from the puddle on the rug. "I cannot believe he wet your floor. And *you're* the four-legged animal!"

Behind her, Nash made a strange noise, a cross between a snort and a growl.

"Oh, you smell it too?" The dung cart had just stopped beneath their window, the driver halting his donkey to inspect something on the ground.

Outside a fast-moving blur caught her attention and Laney turned to investigate. "Would you look at that?" she trilled once she realized what she was seeing, so lighthearted, it was a wonder she wasn't levitating. "Reginald's already outside—running away without even taking time to pack! And the sun's finally shining! What a glorious— Wait a minute." Laney stuck her head out the open window. "The stables! Oh Mr. Hammond, I do believe he's...he is! Reginald's climbing on a horse. Scaling one, more like."

She pulled back inside the room, laughing so hard she gave herself the hiccups. But at least her dress was on, shawl slung over her shoulders to camouflage the buttons she couldn't quite reach.

"Pardon me," she said after another hiccup, "but Reginald can't ride! He's a complete buffoon when it comes to horses." Neither could she stop checking the view below. The one before her only made her tongue flap.

"Oh dear me. The driver of the dung cart just scooped up my hat, the candles too. I daresay he'll make his missus very happy indeed when he arrives home. And look—Reginald's holding on for dear life, bouncing all over the place! His horse is a bonesetter for sure. Fitting, don't you think? There he goes, trotting away in a cloud of dust and curses. I suppose that means the ground's finally drying. Poof!" She snapped her fingers. "He's gone, almost as quickly as you turned into a cat. Fascinating, that. I'm ever so happy I finally witnessed your transformation."

She was jabbering again, Laney knew it, but couldn't seem to stop herself. Not when she'd been provided with undeniable proof that her mystifying visions were true. Not when her entire body still quivered with the strange crazy-wonderful sensations Mr. Hammond caused to riot within her. Not when he wouldn't stop growling at her!

And most assuredly not when she'd just been granted her freedom!

Laney spied her slippers and slid them on. One stocking was ripped to shreds—how'd that happen? The other kept drooping at her ankle. "No matter. I'm free! Free! Did you hear him? I'm free!"

"And you *are* the big cat I kept seeing. I knew it! Impossible but true. Your eyes, you know—they give you away. Wait 'til I tell Mary about this!" Nash sidestepped when her skirts hit him in the face. "Oh! Forgive me. I simply cannot believe it. *Cannot* believe it."

She did a little jig around the magnificent creature who was now on his feet and watching her warily—probably reluctant to get whacked by her dress again—still searching for the rest of her attire. "Gads, what a rum morning! I don't believe I've ever been in such exalted spirits!"

"Do you realize..." She paused to take a breath and tugged on the gloves she'd just unearthed. "Over thirty-six months I was with him, pampered by him, and he treated me fine until recently."

Without conscious thought her hand went to her right arm then she shrugged, too excited to stay still. "I want to pet you but, um, that'll have to wait. To be perfectly honest, I'm not certain about those teeth. They're really...well, *long*. You do realize that I won't be satisfied until you explain," she waved her arm back and forth, encompassing his length, "this whole cat-change thing, don't you?"

Laney twirled in place. Where was her parasol?

"But not quite yet. I need to walk off this jitteriness. I'm too agitated to sit still for explanations right this moment. Joyfully agitated, but still. I apologize Mr. Hammond, but I need to *move*. Oh, I do hope you understand." When a snarl rumbled from his throat the moment she started to stroke his shaggy head, she jerked back, bumping into the door. "Soon. I'll return soon and you can explain the marvel that is you! Without, uh...grunting at me, do you not agree? You *can* understand everything I'm saying, can't you? Heavens. I've never been faced with anything like this before. You don't happen to see my parasol anywhere, do you? Just shake your head. No? Did that mean no? Hmm. I'll assume that meant no. Very well. I'm sure I'll find it later. For now – for now, I'm free!"

So giddy her feet kept dancing as fast as her words kept falling, Laney heaved on the door until it came loose enough for her to slip through then she propped it back in place.

Flying down the hallway, she ran into the innkeeper who looked slightly mollified compared to earlier. "Ah, Miss? Madam? Eh...Ma'am?"

"Yes?" Still smiling, Laney halted, clueless how a *former* indentured servant should be addressed.

"Th' gent wot's jus' left told me to give you these." He handed her a sheaf of crumpled parchment. Pages she recognized very well. "An' 'e did pay for the damages to me door, so seein' as 'ow 'e appeared to be th' one causin' all th' trouble..."

"He was," Laney confirmed, contemplating the pages and thinking about more than just the present. She was thinking about her future. "Most assuredly."

"Then as long's you an' your mister 'ave th' coins to pay for yours an' I don't 'ear any more of them strange noises comin' from your direction, you can stay. Everybody's plans got thrown off with these infernal rains an' ole Toby ain't gonna be th' one to strand you folks out in th' night."

Laney chose not to point out that it was broad daylight. "Thank you. I'm not positive yet exactly what plans...the, ah, mister and I have, but be assured I'll tell him of your kind offer."

The pages weighed heavily in her hand. Her scrip to freedom.

Freedom or...her future? Which did she cherish more? A life of independence or the outcome she'd glimpsed several times over since boarding the stagecoach and encountering Mr. Hammond? An outcome that still raised as many questions as it answered, but foretold happiness indeed. *If* she was willing to chance it...

Trusting in the cursed-blessed visions more than she ever had in her life, Laney held on to the promise of a future with the irascible, impossible man upstairs—Grandmum would be so proud!—and released the document in her possession, handing the pages back to the innkeep. “Please give these to my good Mr. Hammond when he comes downstairs. After all the excitement earlier, he’s, ah, *resting* and would rather not be disturbed right now.”

“Very well, m’lady.” Responding to Laney’s tone and manner, he let the courteous, if completely erroneous, address fall from his lips.

She let it.

“I’ll just retrieve my bonnet from Mr. Tate’s room and go for a little stroll. Would you please send up one of the maids to attend my toilet?” *And do up my buttons!* “And if you would be so kind, please don’t let Mr. Tate’s room until this evening so my dear Mr. Hammond and I may gather my belongings. I’m afraid Mr. Tate attempted to commandeer some of my personal affects that didn’t rightfully belong to him,” — Wasn’t that the truth? — “and Mr. Hammond is helping me secure them.”

Chapter Eight

New Hope and New Hats

She'd asked for a few minutes. Nash gave her twenty-nine.

Not because he was feeling generous or anything of the sort, but because he was still in the form of *a deuced wild cat!*

The only reason he hadn't panicked was because once he'd heard his name, he'd cocked an ear toward the stairwell and easily made out the remainder of the conversation she had with the innkeeper. *What* was supposed to happen when he came downstairs? he wondered.

Resting, his furry arse.

Ah, but...

My dear Mr. Hammond and I may gather my belongings. My dear Mr. Hammond.

Confident she intended to return, for her personal clothing and hideous hats if nothing else, Nash waited.

First patiently.

Then impatiently.

Then with the fear of God running through him. Now that he'd succumbed to the curse, was he destined to stay like this forever?

Hadn't exactly thought that part out, did you? When you rushed in to save a whore?

"She's not a whore!" he shouted. Only it came out, "Rrr-Kaa-owwww!"

The loudness made even him jump. Damnation, he had to figure this thing out.

Fight to change back. He had unfinished business.

Explanations? Laney thought *he* owed *her* explanations?

If anything, he needed to regain his human form so he could inquire how in blazes she'd learned about his secret—why she hadn't jumped out the window in fear or expired on the spot.

How she'd known to encourage him to "Be the cat!", practically rendering him mute all over again?

* * * * *

Forty-seven minutes now.

He'd tried every possible thing that came to mind...

Thinking himself human. It hadn't worked.

Wishing himself human. Hadn't worked.

Demanding himself human. Hadn't. Fucking. Worked.

Begging. Pleading. No and no.

Spitting and growling and hissing hadn't worked either.

God-damning his grandfather and that African witch doctor—the two Nash considered wholly responsible for the curse—had only brought a surge of pain firing up his legs. All demmed four of them.

Why wasn't she back yet? *Soon* did not extend beyond forty-prigging-seven minutes!

Had Dandy returned and claimed her now that she was wandering about unattended? Nash should never have let her leave.

One hard propulsion from his hind legs and he was at the window, sniffing and looking out with surreptitious glances. The last thing Nash needed was for some hunter to catch sight of his newly formed muzzle and sight the open end of his hunting rifle between Nash's eyes.

He sniffed again.

The recent rains had washed the landscape clean. But he caught it—caught them both. The weakening odor of Dandy's dissipating fear—confirming that the bastard was long gone—and the sweetly alluring fragrance unique to Laney.

Subtle but present, easily overpowering the other scents he noticed because this was the one he focused on. His eyes automatically followed a dirt path out past the stables, one that set off through a field, edging alongside a thick grove of trees.

Wherever she'd wandered off to, it wasn't far, not if he could still identify her direction so readily.

God. *Laney*.

After bumping his head on the window ledge, Nash turned around and padded to the bed. He rested his heavy jaw on the mattress. Seeing out either side of his face with one hell of a broad nose in the center was taking some getting used to.

Maybe it would just wear off. If he waited long enough, maybe...

Maybe? Maybe hadn't gotten him anywhere, now had it?

* * * * *

Ninety-two frigging minutes had passed. Ninety-two!

And if he had to go another ninety-two or smell Reginald's piss another second—he would jump out the window and likely get a bellyful of lead blasted through him, and that certainly wouldn't help his cause with Laney.

And what exactly do you want with her? that annoying, persistent part of him wanted to know. *It's not as if you love her.*

Nash licked the side of his right paw and brought it to his ear, scratching his head just where he fancied she'd almost petted him. No, he didn't love her. It was too soon for that.

But he did *like* her. Lust after her. Want to be with her and see where this...odd acquaintance between them might go.

You don't deserve her or a future with –

"RRrrrRRWWwauuow!" Translation, "I do! I do deserve her!"

At the very least, Laney deserved to hear the awful truth about him and what he did to Phineas – then *she* could make the decision.

And he'd tell her. Just as soon as he could figure out how to speak English in such a way that it didn't sound as if he were murdering a boatload of badgers.

* * * * *

Another forty-three minutes elapsed...

Nash peered into the looking glass he'd just pilfered from the room next door. Tate certainly wouldn't have need of it again.

Demmed if he wasn't a new man!

All it took was having an epiphany of universal proportions and raiding Tate's trunk after speaking with the innkeep.

At least Nash was walking on two legs now, had shed his mane, his fur and his fear of fox hunters. His muzzle was gone too, nose completely returned to normal, he was pleased to note. And had he ever worn so many clothes? Certainly not such formfitting ones. He looked bang up to the mark, if he did say so himself. But that wasn't all he needed to say...

The only thing still bogging him down was uncertainty surrounding what Laney would make of his confessions. But confess he must.

Using the "cursed lion" defense could only get him so far. Valid excuse or not, for the first time in memory, Nash *wanted* to rise above his beastly nature. Wanted to mature into the kind of man his brother had always been—one who not only accepted responsibility, but more than that, *embraced* it.

A challenge Nash was ready to face.

If he could only gaze again on Laney's winsome face without roaring her head off and scaring the bugaboo out of her. Poor princess, she'd tried to cover it, but it'd been easy to discern—his fearsome fangs and vicious-sounding vocals had put her in a petrified pucker.

His tongue might no longer be lolling about past his jaw, but regaining human form hadn't automatically turned Nash into a silver-tongued devil, especially not when he considered his reaction to seeing her features for the first time. Given how he'd been

expecting to behold a veritable hag beneath the veil, it was no wonder he'd been struck dumb.

A more stunning female he couldn't fathom.

Thick, wavy hair framed an ivory complexion, the blush on her cheeks luring him to touch. But there hadn't been time.

Pink, pouty lips, swollen from kissing *his* cock, had beckoned him with an inviting curve all to themselves. Even when pressed into a tight line and trembling with her tears, they'd tempted...he'd wanted to kiss her mouth, see those plump lips bloom in a smile. But he hadn't had a chance.

Her eyes, mirroring his own uncertainty, had gazed at him rife with confusion, even *after* he routed Tate, but dashed if he could recall their exact hue.

Gray? Green? *Striped*?

Damn. He had to see her once more. And again after that. And again, *ad infinitum*.

He'd found his very own virgin all right. All that he'd ever wanted...a simple, ordinary female, one who was just his.

But Laney was far from a simple peasant or mere servant. She was far from *ordinary*. And now that he had both time and opportunity, why was he still standing upstairs on his newly cleaned floor instead of outside tailing her scent?

Why? Why wasn't he racing out the door to find her?

Because you, Nash the Lionhearted, his conscience piped up, unlike King Lear's Kent are most assuredly not qualified for that which ordinary men are fit for. Ordinary? Bah!

Nash stumbled backward and crashed against the bed, sinking into the mattress when his legs refused to support him.

Was that why he kept stalling, waiting for her to return? Deep down, did he truly think he deserved to have his penis pegged to a pine pier? Or piked with a pine pin?

No, he goddamned didn't!

He deserved to have that ordinary life he craved. With the *extraordinary* woman he'd just saved.

Now that he'd regained the ability to speak, nothing would hold him back. Nothing!

Except perhaps the demmed nervousness anchoring his feet in place, hobbling him more than chains ever could.

Acting the brave man took courage. And at the moment, Nash had never felt more like a cowardly lion, one who wanted nothing more than to tuck tail and *run*.

* * * * *

"Well don't you look dapper!" Laney exclaimed then exhaled in pure relief. He'd come for her!

The longer she'd walked, the more anxious she'd become. It wasn't every day one woke to the wonder of sleeping with a man for the first time. Or explored that man's body intimately. Or had their own body explored and *plumbed*...

Not every day one witnessed their lover transform into a cat! Or realize they'd quite lost a piece of their heart, completely without meaning to.

Lacking the fortitude to face him in such a confined space so soon after her discovery, Laney had remained outside, alone with her disconcerting thoughts. But he was here now, if a trifle reserved, contemplating the sky rather than looking at her when he inquired in a rusty voice quite unlike his own, "Permit me to walk with you?"

"Certainly." Purposefully subduing her own unease, Laney skipped ahead and curved her arm through the crook of Mr. Hammond's. "Do my eyes deceive me or are you actually wearing a hat?" She smiled up at him, but he avoided her gaze by ducking, giving her a clear view of the fancy headwear. "First one I've seen you don, if I'm not mistaken. Wait. Is that *Reginald's*?"

"Shouldn't pose a problem. I won't be wearing it long." Firmly, he guided them onto the path she'd been following back to the inn. Over two hours she'd waited and walked, waited and rested, waited and hoped. *Two hours*, speculating whether he was going to come after her or not.

"Oh?" Then because she couldn't wait any longer, "What kept you?"

But instead of answering, Mr. Hammond took a little-used detour off the main path, directing them straight through the copse of trees she'd skirted previously. Once in the shade, the dank earth compressed beneath her feet.

Three paces in, he stopped. "Your shoes..."

Laney tugged him forward, savoring the thought of being outside *alone* with him. "They'll dry."

"You were looking for this, I believe?" He shifted and brought her parasol up between them, his eyes darting to hers then away again.

"How thoughtful!" Laney took the parasol in her right hand, but kept her left firmly ensconced over his arm, the gesture warming her heart. "I won't need it here in the shadows, but I'll happily use it once we emerge. Thank you, kind sir."

Every bit the gentleman, he inclined his covered head. His long hair had been pushed to the side, trapped beneath the hat band. She observed how his attention wavered between guiding their steps and glancing toward her face, attempting to see beyond the everyday bonnet's protruding brim. It was the plainest hat she'd packed. Her fingers had lingered when selecting it earlier after she'd changed, tempted to put one of her others on. In the end, despite how very vulnerable it made her feel, she'd tied the plain bonnet firmly beneath her chin and marched out of the inn, ready to face the day and her future. Whatever uncertainty either might hold.

Focused on snatching glimpses of her, he stumbled over a fallen branch. Laney allowed her feet to still and turned toward him.

With increasing intensity, his eyes roved over her naked face. She resisted the impulse to look away, but her lips parted of their own accord and she queried, "Truly, Mr. Hammond, what *kept* you?"

The muscles in his forearm flexed beneath her gloved fingertips. "You did say you'd return, did you not?" he inquired without inflection, as if he were commenting on nothing of import.

She wanted to take her parasol and wallop him across his starched-up shirt points. "Yes, but I thought you'd *follow* after me."

His nostrils flared as if catching scent of something. "It was expected of me then, to come for you?"

"Well...yes. With your miraculous abilities, one would think—"

"Abilities?" erupted from him, and his arm turned to granite. "My form may change, but that does not translate into possessing a talent for knowing what manner of notions lurk within the female mind, I assure you." His voice had smoothed from its earlier rasp but was no less intense. "Even looking upon your face while we speak, seeing how your lips move, your eyes spark, you're still as much a mystery to me as when you were veiled."

A mystery? *Her*? No one had ever said such a thing.

He remained stiffly in front of her, his uncharacteristic awkwardness ironically mitigating her own, enough so she could share, "I feared perhaps your journey north took precedence over our...um..."

"Our what?" he inquired somberly.

"Ah...association?" she hazarded, quite uncertain how to term their relationship up to this point.

His eyelids closed heavily then he blinked them open, piercing her with that glowing gaze of his. "*Never*."

And what did that mean? "*Never*?"

He took a deep breath, one that strained the fabric stretched taut over his broad chest, but didn't speak. Laney looked closer at his chest—if she wasn't mistaken, the burgundy tailcoat he now wore had belonged to Reginald too! As had the pinstriped waistcoat beneath it. And his cravat was a work of art. "You look magnificent."

"For you," he said, impressing her all over again. Even more when he continued, "Returning to your earlier concern, I currently cannot fathom anything that might claim precedence over our...association."

The sentiment behind his strained words calmed her further. If she could call her excessively fast breathing and monstrosly rioting stomach *calm*.

"You're bruising."

Flummoxed, she murmured, "What?"

"That bastard," he swore, bringing his fingers to her face and skimming over the area where Reginald's gun had left its mark. "If I ever see him again, I'll—"

With a terse growl, he jerked away and heaved another breath.

"You'll what?" she whispered, face thrumming from his touch.

His eyes narrowed. "Kill him. A slow and painful death I'll take great joy inflicting."

Before Laney could decide quite what she thought of that chivalrously bloodthirsty statement, he raised one arm and mashed the beaver lower on his forehead then captured her hand and started weaving his way unerringly deeper into the woods.

They proceeded in silence. Silence that didn't extend to the furious pounding of her heart or the wind-ruffled leaves surrounding them or the jubilant chattering of the birds darting overhead in celebration of the clear day.

Did they too perhaps think Laney was in for a fortuitous future? One complete with gazebos, Mr. Hammond and...*children*?

When they came upon a small creek swollen from the recent rains, he slowed his furious pace. Taking advantage of his stillness, Laney idly commented, "You do know that while I very much appreciate...how you..."

Nash's grip tightened on her hand and he went first, assisting her across the slick stepping stones. Securing her hold on the parasol as much as his outstretched hand, Laney concentrated on placing her feet directly where his trod, not wanting to drench her slippers.

"Appreciate?" he prompted once he'd gained dry ground on the other side.

She paused and lifted her gaze from the rushing crystal waters to sweep over his fashionable attire. She'd never seen him equipt in such finery. "While the sight of you done up as the most proper of rum-togged swells is wholly attractive, Mr. Hammond, I find I rather miss the impertinent young man who goes about sans hat and steps on hems."

Seeing the twinkle enter his expression for the first time since joining her, Laney breathed easier, ready to celebrate along with the birds. His thumb slid over the back of her gloved hand and her entire palm tingled.

Palm? Who was she bamming? Her entire body reacted to his touch. The fluttering in her stomach increased from a riot to an all-out rebellion, her breathing went all tantwivy, and before she knew it, her foot began a swift slide off the rock. "Aaaa!"

Rescuer *extraordinaire*, Mr. Nash Hammond hauled her to him before the water claimed so much as her little toe. "Oh!"

Instinctively she grabbed his lapels.

Hands firm about her waist, he carried her farther from the creek, not placing her feet on the ground until reaching drier dirt. Not easing his hold until he'd leaned back against a thick tree trunk, and not until after allowing her body to glide along the entire length of his. "Ohhh..."

With one palm firmly fastened on her posterior, Nash secured her in place—as if she had any intention of leaving! He touched the brim of her bonnet with his free hand.

"And I find that I much prefer this simple bonnet to those veiled atrocities you wear like a suit of armor."

He gazed at every facet of her face while he spoke, the look in his gleaming eyes as much of a caress as the finger that stroked down her temple, feathered over the bruise.

"No more veils," Laney whispered the promise. "No more hiding."

"Good. But don't throw the others out. I have use for them."

"A use for my hats?"

He nodded. "Along with this infernal contraption on my head."

Laney relinquished her hold on his jacket in order to touch his cheek, his jaw. Both smooth. "And what, pray tell, use could you possibly have for my hats?"

"Target practice."

She saw the laughter finally enter his eyes. But it didn't reach his lips. Instead, Nash spread his fingers over her bum and pulled her closer. "Don't move," he rasped.

"Wouldn't dream of it."

Unhurriedly he lowered his head to hers, descending slower than a lake freezes in summer, as if giving her an opportunity to change her mind and flee his improper embrace.

Laney didn't move.

Just before their lips connected, his hat brim bumped into her bonnet.

Nash swore and released her, jumping back as if she slapped him.

Which she most certainly hadn't!

They'd been about to *kiss*! Their first real lip-to-lip, tongue-to-tongue kiss. "Mr. Hammond?" Laney resisted the urge to wallop him in truth. "Why did you stop?"

Nash ripped the offensive hat off his head and hurled the expensive beaver through the air. When it landed in a soggy pile of underbrush, he stomped over to it, *on* top of it and back again, all the while shooting quick glances at a gaping Laney.

Grinding his heel into the hat once more, he finally faced her. "I apologize for ever thinking you were a sow."

She blinked.

"I apologize for not helping you the first time you asked."

She raised her eyebrows.

He clenched his hands to keep from mauling her again. "I apologize for taking you in anger, for taking your *virginity*, for treating you like..." He swallowed, squeezed his fists. "Like a whore."

Her eyes widened then *she* swallowed and licked her lips, but before she could say anything, Nash decided to hell with it and rushed forward. He grasped her wrists, ignoring how the handle of the parasol dug into his palm.

"I'm truly sorry for every single blasted thing I've done wrong with you. Can you find the forgiveness in your heart that my actions don't warrant but *I* need, desperately so?"

Given how his formal skills were as ill-used as a pickpocket's, he nevertheless managed to perform a credible bow then he lifted her free hand to his lips, placing a kiss on the back through her glove, wishing he could dispense with the barrier as effectively he had his hat.

Looking up at her through the cloak of his hair—she wasn't the only one who had a penchant for hiding—Nash pleaded, "Will you give me the chance to rewrite our blighted past and make everything up to you? Please?"

Without waiting for her to respond—to deny him—he straightened and dragged her off the path. "Follow me, if you would," he said not giving her choice. "Only a bit farther."

Through the thickly clustered trees, weaving around their tall, stately trunks and over surprisingly dry ground given the recent downpours, he forged a trail with nary a hitch to his step, tugging her behind him.

"While you were out walking, I brought this down...and...I..."

And then the small clearing he'd found earlier was before them, the faded quilt from his room spread open over drying grass, the sun streaming down from above, its bright light playing peekaboo with the leaves overhead, highlighting the crude basket full of breads and cheese he'd arranged, complete with an unopened bottle of wine and clean glasses. He'd paid dearly for the privilege of bringing everything outside, but found Mr. Innkeeper and his lady wife extremely accommodating once gold crossed their palms. He also had Laney's indenture papers stashed inside so he could return them later. Later, after he'd said his piece, assuming she remained for the telling.

Swallowing hard, he waited for her reaction.

She came up beside him and gasped in surprise. Turning toward him, she asked softly, "You said you wanted to make it up to me. In what manner exactly?"

He wasn't so far gone that he didn't remember the carefree years before the curse took control, the years in which time was all he had, time to indulge to his heart's content and hone his lovemaking skills as only a young man without responsibilities could. He'd once prided himself on giving his partner pleasure first. He hadn't always been a ruthless *taker*.

Considering how he'd permitted The Change to occur and given how he and Laney had come together such a short time ago, Nash was confident his animalistic urges would remain at bay for several hours, sufficient time to honor her as he'd neglected to previously. Honor her body before his own. "Let me show you how it's supposed to be between a man and a woman. Let me love you as you deserve. Let me—"

"Love?" she whispered, her hand flexing within his grasp.

Nash let go. "Your body. Let me love your body."

He didn't have the right to ask for more. Not yet. "I swear to you I won't become rough this time." Lord help him uphold that vow. "I'll demonstrate the patience of Job, I promise," he swore like a dolt. Who compared themselves to biblical icons during a bumbling seduction? "I promise I won't do anything you...don't..."

He fumbled to a stop when she stepped away and began untying the ribbon beneath her chin. The one securing her bonnet.

"Go on." She removed the bonnet, revealing a mass of upswept, pinned-in-place glorious hair. Sauntering toward the quilt as if she had all the time in the world, she placed her hat and the parasol in the corner containing the victuals. Then she sat down precisely in the center of the patchwork fabric. "You were saying?"

Nash stormed over to the nearest tree and gripped an overhead branch with both hands, digging his fingers into the bark. "I was saying..." He practically choked on the words, seeing Laney ease her shawl from her shoulders—more specifically, seeing the bare skin of her upper chest the maneuver revealed. Wait a min— "You changed dresses."

She smiled and dimples appeared on either side of her sassy mouth. "That I did, and you have an abominable habit of not completing your sentences. You were saying?"

"I promise you won't be left aching this time."

"Left *aching*?" she queried with no small amount of surprise, derailing him all over again.

"I promise," he swore, clutching the damn limb so tight it was a wonder it didn't spontaneously compress into a sheet of foolscap.

"But I wasn't left..." She waved a gloved hand in front of her face, as if waving away her protest, waving away his asinine claims that he could satisfy her. No wonder, given how he treated her. Nash felt the cad all over again.

"Ahh," she said airily. "Please forgive the interruption." By now she'd neatly folded the shawl and placed it beneath the bonnet. Her slippers quickly followed then she turned her attention to her stockings and Nash noticed they'd been replaced as well. Only now they were being *displaced* as she gradually revealed her legs to his lecherous gaze. At the strangled sound coming from his throat, she paused in her efforts and looked up. "Yes? Do continue. What other promises might you have to offer?"

"Your body...I promise to assuage the ache, to...satisfy..." Damn his muddled words! He was making a confounded mess of this. "I know you must be sore from what I—God, I'm sorry—but..."

One side of her mouth lifted in a tiny smile and the first stocking followed the shawl. Finally! Any slower and he'd likely combust.

"Sore? Of a certainty," she confided, running her covered fingertips up the length of her lower leg. When she neared the apex of her thighs, she promptly lowered her skirts, hiding the tantalizing view.

Then she remarked, as if commenting on nothing more than the weather, "Truth be told, my bum's rather making itself felt," and Nash forgot how to breathe. It didn't help when she added, "Were I to be completely forthright, I must also confess there are *several* places on my person that are more than a little tender."

Feeling wood splintering beneath his fingers, Nash realized he'd been scraping his nails into the limb and it was gouging him right back.

As if she undressed in front of a man every day of the week, Laney extended her second leg out past her dress and peeled back the remaining stocking one agonizing, mouthwatering inch at a time, exposing the creamy skin of her thigh then her muscled calf.

A piece of chipped bark dropped in front of his face. Nash blew it away, emptying his neglected lungs and watched, captivated, as she shifted on that *tender bum* of hers, raised the hem of her dress and stroked her palm over the bared flesh. "What about you, Mr. Hammond? Are you tender anywhere?"

Lightheaded now, Nash was startled when a twig snapped off in the vicinity of his little finger. He remembered to inhale then ground out, "Hard as stone. Hot as flame." *Horned for your honeypot.*

"Mmm. Poetic in your torment, are you not?" she laughed.

He growled low in his chest.

She shot him an innocently sultry look from beneath lowered lashes, which should have been impossible because innocents weren't sultry and, thanks to him, she was no longer innocent. But somehow Laney proceeded to be both. Provocative yet pure. Demure yet beckoning. How? Any other innocent exposed to his beastly side would be haring off as if he carried the Great Plague. But not Laney. Why?

"At least, from what I can see, you're not growing fur or claws this time," she said, blasting his confusing musings straight to hell. Before he could process her statement, the vanishing stocking revealed perfectly formed toes then joined its mate. Laney rose to her knees and turned her back to him. She spoke over one shoulder. "Help me with my dress, would you, Mr. Hammond? And do please explain about your twitching whiskers and swishing tail. I am beside myself with curiosity, wondering how –"

"Can't. Not now." Control broke, along with the branch. Nash lunged forward and dove to the quilt, swooping Laney up on his way down.

"Omph!"

They hit the ground and he rolled to his back, rotating the squirming woman above him until her body covered his. Her eyes sparkled at him.

Moss green.

They were green, he noted, the softest, loveliest shade. She brushed a hank of hair off his forehead. "I do believe your definition of patience and Job's aren't quite the same."

"Patience be damned. I want you naked." With fingers gone clumsy, Nash lifted his arms to her back and worked the buttons of her dress sight unseen. Laney held her upper body aloft and toyed with his ear.

One button slid free. Then a second.

He couldn't stop gazing at her. "You are so very beautiful, you know that?"

"Thank you." A slight blush rose to her cheeks. "I confess to immodest relief upon hearing that you think so. For all you did was snarl earlier in your room."

Smiling grimly, Nash confessed, "The cat had my tongue, but it's nimble enough now to pay you a thousand compliments. Shall I demonstrate? Eyes like velvety moss, hair the sheen of a raven's wing..." His fingers snagged but eventually the third button released. "How could I not be enamored with what I behold before me? Finely arched brows, beautifully rounded cheeks—"

"Rounded?" she giggled. "Like a pig's?"

Mangling that fourth buttonhole, he winced. "I'm the swine. You're an impish cherub. An angel."

She giggled and he made quick work of buttons five and six by just ripping the fabric.

"Angel, Mr. Hammond?" Those dimples appeared again. Positively enchanting. "I daresay no one's ever compared me to the heavenly realms before."

"No mister," he reminded, wrestling the seventh and remaining buttons free and tugging the neckline down. If he hadn't managed to open enough, the dress could damn well keep tearing. "I'm not waiting another minute to see these luscious beauties."

"My breasts?" she breathed, sitting upright and easing the dress past her shoulders. Kneeling over his torso, she held the dress to her bosom and batted her lashes playfully. "I rather thought it was my bum you fancied."

Nash found himself panting. What happened to taking his time? "I fancy all of you, I'm discovering. The dress?" he ended on a growl.

Smiling indulgently in the face of his extreme discomfort—she hadn't once slid her body over the raging erection he'd been sporting since that first stocking had decamped—Laney straightened, pulled the dress over her head and dropped it to the side, leaving her every charm bared to his gaze. Several strands of her glorious hair had escaped and now trailed down over her upper chest, coiling enticingly near one nipple.

She'd foregone undergarments. His cock twitched at the realization.

The breasts he so admired plumped together when she brought her hands to his waistcoat, the perky tips turning rigid and rosy once exposed to the air, pouting for his touch. His tongue?

"Lean forward," he commanded.

Instead of obeying, Laney stretched her arms overhead, causing those bounteous beauties to lift and sway. "I think not," she taunted, "not without more promises and more explanations."

"Eleanor. Catherine. Buckley!"

"You remember my name!" For some reason, that completely warmed Laney's heart.

The glow didn't dim even when he continued, practically hissing at her, "I want a taste. *Now*."

Simply knowing he stared at her breasts, admired them, made her nipples pucker. But she wasn't about to give in so easily. He had over two hours to make up for. Two hours and a host of confusion.

Wearing nothing but her long gloves, Laney tightened her thighs along his torso and brought her arms down to begin working the most intricate design she'd seen to date in his cravat. "Very impressive," she complimented, smiling at him. "Which knot is it? The Mathematical? The Oriental?"

"Haste. And I'm out of promises," he said with real regret, his broad hands coming to rest on the outside of her hips.

Laney kept at the linen, certain if she looked down or he looked up they'd both see how wet and ready her cunny had made itself for him. "The Haste? I'm afraid I haven't heard of that one. From—"

"From me hurrying too damn fast to get to you," he admitted just as she pried the stubborn knot free. She pulled the narrow fabric from behind his head, ready to place it atop her clothing pile, but Nash stopped her. "No. I want you to tie it around your neck."

Confused by the command, she nevertheless did as asked, tensing her legs to balance herself while she drew the fabric around her nape. Although unused to dealing with the five feet of starched linen, it took but a moment to fashion the neckerchief into a lopsided bow, the ends trailing down over her — "Ah! You sneaky fiend."

Nash had taken the opportunity to bring both his hands to her breasts. "Simply showing my appreciation."

"You can appreciate me any time," Laney informed him when he began kneading the aching flesh. "Mmm, like that," she encouraged. "A little—*harder*," she gasped when he complied before the request was fully uttered.

"Now that I'm in this position," he mused, his fingertips tweaking her nipples, "I realize there *is* another promise I can make."

"Oh?" Laney pushed herself into his touch, yearning to ride his cock through his pantaloons, to slide her moist slit right over the nankeen fabric and abrade herself to heaven, but refraining. Refraining because more than anything, she wanted him to take her there. Wanted to know the bliss of Nash Hammond's promise to love her as a man loved a woman.

Had she ever thought to experience *that*?

His tweaking motions grew firmer. Little pinches on her nipples that sent lightning streaking from her breasts to her belly.

He left off pinching her nipples and curved his hands beneath her breasts as if gauging their weight. "Hmm. While not quite as large as I imagined..."

Laney made a mew of dismay. Was he disappointed? Now that he saw all of her?

His palms returned to caressing the mounds, his fingers plying deep into her flesh. "I promise that your bosom boasts the most glorious pair I've ever had the pleasure to pleasure."

"Mr. Hammond! Mmmm, Nash, I—" Laney was biting her lips, twitching her hips, fighting to keep from lowering herself on his body. "I don't want to ruin your pantaloons, but I..."

"Certainly not," his low voice intoned. "They and my boots are about the only thing on my person that are *mine*. But I invite you to ruin anything else that strikes your fancy."

She whimpered a laugh, unwilling to soil such finery even if it did belong to her former owner. "Mr. Hammond!"

"Ah." He released her breasts and bracketed her waist, tilting her pelvis. "Ah yes, my eyes confirm what my nose already knew. Glistening tidings await my cock between your thighs."

"For shame, to speak such things out loud. *Outside*," she admonished.

Glistening tidings indeed.

When he licked his lips, her entire muff responded. Shameful or not, so ready was she to do the slithery, Laney only wanted to hear more. "How naughty you are. Pray, continue."

His fingers tightened when she relaxed her legs and attempted to rub her pussy over his waistcoat. "Not yet," he tut-tutted. "I do believe I've changed my mind, for did I not make a promise—"

"Several in fact." She squirmed, touching her own needy breasts now that he'd abandoned them for her waist. "But I want...crave..." Knowing it and *saying* it were altogether different. "Please!"

"Ah, sweet princess." He lifted her up and off him—Laney acceded with a squeak of protest. "I know that you're aching now, but believe me when I tell you it's all for the best."

Nash guided her to her back then lowered himself between her splayed legs—and him still fully attired except for the linen neckcloth she now sported. Unfair!

He scooted down between her legs and placed his hands on her inner thighs, spreading them wide and opening her folds to his gaze and the naughty intentions she'd just accused him of. Or so she hoped.

His fingers tapped along her flushed skin, coming closer and closer to her pussy without ever touching. "Now tell me, Miss Buckley, what exactly would you have me do? I am completely and utterly at your service."

She arched forward, trying to grip his shoulders, but he pushed her back down and grabbed her parasol. "Here. Open this," he ordered. "Twirl it overhead."

Beg pardon?

Words failed her.

Placing a lingering but too-brief kiss to her thigh, he demonstrated by opening the parasol and spinning it as he placed her numb fingers around the handle. "Very good. Yes, just like that. Keep your hands busy while I go about my business."

"Your business?" Her parasol had never weighed so much. "What happened to *at my service*?"

"The business of easing your ache. *After* I fan it higher."

"Oh. Oh!"

Her quim flinched then fairly melted when Nash placed his strong fingers on either side and spread her weeping flesh for his heavy-lidded gaze, followed immediately by the encore of his tongue.

Without further ado or added talk of promises or easing aches, Nash set himself upon the self-appointed task of driving one Miss Laney Catherine Buckley wild with lust and weak with desire. And, most importantly, replete with satisfaction.

Ignoring the iron poker still snugly tucked away in his pantaloons—straining and complaining, but for once, his dick wasn't ruling the day—Nash breathed deep and leaned in, ready to lick and love Laney to her first well-deserved release.

But before he focused solely on *her* delight, a taste for his. A taste to satisfy the beast, not the lionessque beast yearning to get free, but the selfish beast that was Nash Hammond, who'd never dined on anything quite so sweet.

Placing his mouth at her cunt, he pushed his tongue deep, experienced her nectar again flowing over his lips and drank it down. Took her essence into his soul, imagined her honey gliding along his cock, then applied himself to rousing her higher.

Nash swallowed one last time and pulled back, just a fraction, the better to see. Her breathing was labored, her eyes closed, the parasol balanced precariously above them both spinning like a top.

With a gut-felt smile, he perched himself on one elbow and threaded his free hand through the riotous curls guarding her most intimate secrets. He fisted a handful of the short black hairs and tugged sharply toward her abdomen, lifting her skin and exposing her creaming entrance. She let forth a whimper, the parasol spun faster and her cunt wept harder.

Nash inspected every nuance of the intriguing view. It wasn't often that he found himself outside in the light of day and certainly never with a willing wench. But *wench*

didn't seem the appropriate term. Be that as it may – that he lay here between the open thighs of an extraordinarily feminine female, one completely without a stitch on – his eyes flicked overhead and he grinned. Well, without a stitch other than his neckcloth and her long, velvety-soft gloves.

The term wench might fit the situation, but it most assuredly did not fit the creature.

"Why'd you stop? Touch me again!" she ordered loudly, bucking within his hold.

But then again...

In awe of his good fortune, Nash leaned down and flicked her clitoris with the tip of his tongue. The tiny knot flinched then came back for more. Another two flicks, a tight circle, a long, slow sweep down her fragrant slit and he was gone.

"'Tis torture, and not mercy: heaven is here..." For once, the original line seemed perfect. If only for a short while hence, his lips were about to greet heaven's gate. "How about another promise, princess?"

She moaned and attempted to push her cunny against his mouth. Nash resisted.

"I can promise you without reservation," he said sincerely, probing her folds with inquisitive fingers from one hand while still tugging on her midnight curls with the other, "that even were I to give extensive thought to the matter, I could not ever conceive of another more fortuitous position...or pussy."

He returned his mouth to the top of her cleft and slid two fingers straight inside her sex. Her body offered no resistance, only pure welcome, the swift journey made into a sumptuous expedition by her quim's warm, honeyed reception. The muscles of her passage tightened, drawing his fingers deeper. He kissed at the hardened nub beneath his lips, bit gently around the taut nerves and pulled his fingers out then shoved them right back in. Again and again.

A whisper of wind preceded the parasol's crash to the ground. Nash smiled against her core and kept licking.

With the parasol gone, her hands were free. Free to delve into his hair, free to latch on and pull. Ah, but slick fingers were a wonderful thing and her gloved hands slid right off. Nevertheless Miss Laney was determined and before Nash knew it, she took hold of his ears and ground her crotch into his face.

He certainly wasn't one to complain. Loving her with his mouth, with his hands, Nash put everything he had into making his woman climax. His eager erection could wait. Could wait to be sheathed snug inside her pussy. Could wait until he'd at least earned the semblance of honor he figured it took to allow his cock the privilege of stroking a woman like Laney to satisfaction.

Aching himself now, Nash reluctantly eased his fingers from her sheath and grasped both her wrists, forcing her to release his ears. He anchored her hands on either side of her mound, secured them there with his.

To the blessed sound of her whimpers, the undulations of her of her hips and the loud thumping of his own heart, Nash licked and tapped and lashed every bit of her beautiful cunny.

Sinuuous glides of the flat of his tongue over the swollen, pouting lips alternated amid fast, quick beats with the sides of his tongue, back and forth inside her quim and outside, over the plump edges of her labia. Hungry kisses up, around, down and back again, applying his lips to every stunning part. And Laney helped him—rocked her hips to *his* beat for once—swinging to and fro within the confines of his hold, brushing her crying cunny over his face even as her ever-increasing moans brushed by his ears.

He knew she was close. Knew it by the way her pelvis arched into his hands, by the way her pussy started to quiver beneath his lips. Nash stilled. Kept his tongue affixed to the apex of her cleft, felt that tiny pearl reaching for more and tried it again—intentionally called on *Roho ya Simba* to come to him—and there it was. He felt his tongue grow more agile, felt the texture alter, become more abrasive as he held it in place.

Laney groaned, lunged against his mouth again, this time with more force. Her every muscle, every fiber, from the thighs beneath his hands, to the nub beneath his tongue, tensed, strained, then to the music of her screamed orgasm, *released*. Relaxed.

Vibrated, shook and quaked.

Just as he was doing. With every facet of his being.

Her shouted “Blighters!” echoed in the sudden stillness.

“Oh me. Oh my.” Laney’s entire body was shaking as if a herd of wild horses had just trotted across her heart. She tried to slow it down before it beat clear out of her chest. Then she realized what she’d just screamed. “That certainly wasn’t a very ladylike comment, now was it?”

Nash looked up, his reddened face centered between her thighs. Oh Lord. “Is that what you aspire to be? A true lady? Because I certainly cannot give you that.”

Was he intimating there were other things he *could* give her? Other than what he’d just done? Oh my.

“A true *lady*? Heavens, no. I only seek to emulate their qualities in deportment and manner. Yelling curses like a street urchin is no way to...” Her words fell off when he began climbing up her body, stopping once he reached her breasts, and then he left off staring at her in order to stare at them.

Seeing Mr. Hammond leaning over her naked bosom, feeling his clothed body between her legs, against her quivering sex, knowing she wanted his cock there next, made ladylike comparisons seem the height of ludicrous. “It’s only...” she paused when he began licking the underside of one breast, “only that ever since learning how a proper female behaves, I’ve made it a priority to conduct myself...”

His mouth edged upward toward her areola, his eyes connecting with hers. "Even in the bedroom?" His incredibly raspy tongue came out and he licked her nipple once, twice, then around it, staring at her all the while. "You believe you should act like a lady in the bedroom?"

Laney wove her gloved fingers up the back of his head and pulled him down, asking without words for him to kiss her fully. "We're not in any bedroom that I can see."

His head resisted the pressure. "And for that impertinent comment, punishment is in order."

He swooped down and immediately sucked her nipple right into his mouth. He drew on it sharply and Laney's stomach contracted even as her chest pushed higher. "I think being a lady is vastly overrated," she said on a gasp.

After administering deep suction, he released her saliva-covered breast and blew on it. "To be honest, princess, your definition of ladylike needs severe modification."

At that, she attempted to pull his hair. And again the silky strands slid right through her fingers. Laney resorted to pinching the strong muscles of his neck. "What—what do you mean? I've always aspired to be everything that is refined."

Mr. Hammond moved to her other breast but began plying the first one with attention from his warm palm. "Not that I claim extensive experience dealing with females from the upper echelon, but it does seem to me that ladies don't exactly approach strangers with the request to *buy* them."

"But there were extenuating—"

He pinched her nipple, causing her molars to clack together. "Ladies, my dear, don't pretend to be whores for hire and invite themselves into strangers' bedchambers."

He had her there.

"I've never woken to find a *lady's* lips wrapped around my cock."

He *really* had her there.

"Ladies don't necessarily enjoy disrobing strange men in the daylight hours...while *outside*."

Only then did Laney realize she'd released his neck and was frantically tugging at his lapels, trying to remove his jacket. "If I respond that I no longer consider you a stranger in any way, will you please remove your attire and love me properly?"

At that request, his teeth suddenly found their way to her nipple. Biting down, he growled around her flesh, "Properly? Are you saying my tongue at your cunt wasn't good enough?"

Laney managed to wrest his jacket free and concentrated on working the wrist buttons loose on his shirt sleeves. Her breasts preened like golden idols this demon was paying homage to. Had she ever felt more decadent? More free?

"Your tongue was wondrous as you very well know, you wretched man for making me speak these things. But as long as you're demonstrating and fulfilling promises, I want it all and I want it now!"

His teeth were gone, replaced by his licking tongue. It scraped across her puckered nipple, causing a tremor to rack her entire frame. She began tugging his shirt over his head. Nash abandoned her bosom long enough to cooperate with her efforts. When he emerged, there was an unfamiliar glint in his eyes. "It? What exactly do you mean by 'it'? I think this wretched man needs *it* spelled out."

He knelt there, leaning over her, his muscular arms braced on either side of her torso, that delectably smooth, powerful chest appealing to her more than any pastry or sweet bread she'd ever lusted after.

But that was all. He knelt there, unmoving, still wearing his pantaloons, his dark, straight hair half covering one eye, waiting.

Waiting for her to say it blatantly? Or just...indicate it?

"T-A-K-E-O-F-F-Y—"

"Laney." It was a growled order.

"Take off your pants, please, sir."

The glint deepened. "Whatever for?"

"Because I..." Laney scrambled to a sitting position. He allowed the move but leaned forward even more, so that his very presence surrounded her. Their faces were but inches apart.

"Yes?"

The scoundrel! He was going to make her say it after all. "Because I want your cock in my quim!"

He smiled and ran a fingertip down her cheek. "Very good, my pretty princess. Now take off your gloves."

"Wh-Why?"

Nash leaned back—finally—and his hands went to the fastening on his pantaloons. "An exchange forfeit, you see. Your gloves for my pants."

She debated before agreeing. After all, she was the one who had been on blatant display all afternoon. It was surely time he reciprocated. "Are you wearing anything else?"

Nash left his pants partially undone and swiftly dispensed with his boots and stockings. "Nary a stitch."

The bow tied beneath her chin seemed to shout its presence. "But I'll still be wearing—"

"Leave it." He'd gone back to being churlish. Amusing, how it no longer bothered her. In fact, Laney thought his brusque mood close to charming. Especially since it

obviously portended her gaining exactly what she'd asked for—him naked and his sugar stick inside her mound.

"Why yes, m'lawd," she said saucily, beginning to peel back her left glove with more haste than she'd shown undressing previously. The glove came off and she playfully batted it over his head. "Anythin' you say, m'lawd."

"Peppery wench," he complained, but didn't stop removing his pants, standing for one brief moment while he ungracefully stepped out of the tight legs, then sinking back to the quilt as nude as she—except for the lopsided bow around her neck.

"The second glove," he prompted when he saw that her efforts had ceased. Legs straight, arms curved behind his head, his corded stomach in between, he stretched out on their private blanket as if he had not a care in the world. "It's still on," he grumped, pointing with his toe. "Unacceptable."

Laney was too intrigued by the view the midday sun and his sprawled position afforded to take offense. "Gads. You look 'ellish fine," she said without thinking then corrected herself. "I mean *splendid*. Mr. Hammond, you look splendid."

And he did. Magnificent muscles, hairy legs, sculpted shoulders, those sensual side-whiskers—

Laney abandoned her teasing stance and promptly flopped down next to him. She leaned over and kissed beside his ear, encompassing the edge of one angled side-whisker and his surprisingly smooth cheek. "How is it that you are so silken now when earlier you were so very rough?"

He turned his head and stared into her eyes. "Rough? Share your definition of rough, if you would. If memory serves, I've been *rough* with you more than once. Which—"

Laney kissed his mouth shut, cutting off his words, then couldn't help licking his lips. The remnants of her own cream tantalized and she licked him again. Only when he brought his hand up to the back of her head to pull her closer did she finally answer. "Not rough, *whiskery*. Earlier. Your jaw."

Nash raised his head and captured her bottom lip, taking it into his mouth, sucking on it once then releasing. Instead of answering, he instructed, "Simply speak your thoughts, princess. Use whatever words come to those luscious lips and don't moderate them. Refined elocution or street cant. There's no need for you to ever guard yourself with me."

"Why?"

"Because I daresay I know you better than any man—your body certainly—and I want you to be authentically yourself around me henceforth. No more deceptions."

Laney couldn't keep from touching his bare shoulder another moment. She curved her right palm over hard, tensed muscle. "That's very well done of you, but I was asking *why* must I keep answering you explicitly when we both know with assurance that *you* know exactly what I mean?"

Of its own accord, her gloved hand moved lower, stroking leisurely down his chest, stopping over his thick pectoral, fingering his pebbled nipple. She wished she could feel it without the barrier of her glove but, as Mary would've said, *c'est la vie*. Such is life. And based on the way things were progressing, her life promised to get more interesting by the second.

Laney continued drawing designs over his nipple with the utmost of attention. She heard a little hiss come from his throat and centered one fingernail right on top of the nub. "Hmm? I'm certain you do know what I mean. Do you deny it?"

Mr. Hammond captured her inquisitive finger, pressed her palm flat with his strong hand and guided her arm lower. "I don't deny that I crave your dainty fingers wrapped around my cock. I want to feel you gripping my shaft and pumping it like you did this morning, only I anticipate being *awake* the entire time."

His guiding hand moved at a drunken snail's pace, causing her palm and fingers to traverse the hard muscles of his stomach one agonizing second at a time. "I don't deny that after you touch me and explore me, come to know me, that it will be my turn to know you again. My cock will know the wonder of breaching your slit, of sliding deep inside your hot cunny even as my nose now inhales the fragrance of your arousal, as my lips know your taste. I don't deny I want—"

"Stop!"

What he'd done earlier with his mouth had shot sparks through her and she'd loved it, but now, it was as if his teasing left her craving so much more. Left her *burning*. With every heated word he uttered, Laney's need for everything he described grew beyond any desire she'd known before. "That's what you want?"

She wrenched her hand from beneath his firm grasp and grasped *him*, did exactly as he'd painted in her mind—anchored her hand at the base of his wide cock and slid upward, along smooth solid muscle. "You want to *hear* it, don't you? Well fine! I feel your sleek hardness beneath my fingertips and I crave to join with it. Crave to feel you inside my quim. My loins, so recently satisfied by your tongue, now protest their empty state and are weeping for more. For *this*—"

Laney began to climb over his reclining form, still stroking his erection, still pumping him with her hand while her pussy swelled and creamed, readied itself for his invasion. When he persisted in remaining passive, she tried a different tack. "I desire yer cock in my cunt so dreadfully bad I fear I'll forever be a wanton whether you grant me wish or not." He raised one eyebrow, but still didn't touch. "You fiend! I need you to fuck me!"

Laney was almost crying, tugging on his rod with abrupt, inelegant pulls, remembering how he'd jerked away the last time his cock entered her pussy, remembering how he'd just made her feel with his mouth and dying to feel that way again. On either side of his waist, her legs were shaking. His erection was tall and red, straining upward toward her cleft.

Just as she moved her quim into position, angling her pelvis to sink down and take him inside, Nash braced his hands along her thighs and held her aloft, stopping her. He spoke through gritted teeth. "The other glove. *Off now.*"

Beyond thought or argument, Laney held herself suspended above him, released his cock and ripped off her right glove, flinging it as far as she could. "There!" she cried. "Please don't make me wait a —"

"Touch your neck." When she hesitated, he snarled, "*Do it. Now.*"

Confused, Laney brought both hands up and encountered the bow she'd tied earlier.

"What are you wearing?"

"Nothing. I'm not wear —"

His fingers tightened on her thighs. She saw the muscles above his collarbone strain, the thick ridges in his neck standing out. "*What* are you wearing?"

Her fingers grasped the long ends of fabric. "Your...your cravat?"

"Whose?"

"Yours." She finally realized what he was doing. It sickened her as much as elated her. Her legs went weak, but he continued holding her above him. "I'm wearing your leash."

He shook his head, brushed his thumbs over the edges of her slit. "No, it's not a leash, but it is mine. *Mine.* Say it."

"I'm...yours."

"I own you."

That sounded so final, but her body responded to the command, dripping desire over his hands. "Oh God. Nash. Mr. Hammond, I need —"

"Say it." Both of his thumbs entered her, the action causing her lower body to contract and convulse toward him. "Nash!"

"*Say it.*" He slid his thumbs upward, spreading her essence over her quim, then he centered his touch on her clitoris. But he refused to move, to caress her further, no matter how she squirmed within his hold. "I own you. Let me hear you admit it."

Laney swallowed down the instinctive retort and let both her visions and her heart guide her. "I'm yours. You...own me. Now take me!"

"Not yet. Take it off." He spoke harshly. "Give it to me. Now, Laney. Heed me!"

Anxiously, Laney tore at the knot, so wild for him she'd do whatever he wanted. Anything to end the hunger gnawing at her heart, in her cunny. Just...oh God. The bow had gotten tighter since she'd fashioned it. Her efforts were hampered by the steel look in his gaze. No glint. No glowing. Just pure, unadulterated possession.

The look intimidated her. Thrilled her.

The tiny knot of nerves throbbed beneath his stationary touch. Laney whimpered, her hands grappling feverishly with the linen, trying to gain purchase, a fingerhold—anything to get it off her neck and get him in her cunt.

Finally, *finally*, the knot gave way. Before she could hand the fabric over, Nash reached up and snatched it from behind her nape. He held the neckcloth in front of her face.

“Do you see this? Proof of my ownership.” He balled it up and flung it away, his eyes never leaving hers. The possessive look was gone, replaced by an intensity she couldn’t decipher. “You are free, Laney Buckley. *Free*. Do you hear me? No one should ever own another.”

“But I gave—”

“It’s of no consequence. You heard yourself—I owned you and now I’ve granted you your freedom.”

“But—” Did this mean he no longer wanted her? One glance at his groin confirmed the inaccuracy of that thought. Now that she had what she’d always wanted—true, legal freedom—Laney wanted Nash to take it back. Mentally, she’d given herself to him the day they met, though she hadn’t realized it at the time. Physically, she’d given herself last night when he’d breached her maidenhead.

Just hours ago she gave herself to him again when she’d told the innkeeper to give Nash Hammond her indenture papers.

“Laney?” Her name was an impatient growl, his hands back at her thighs, pressing deep into her unsteady flesh.

“Yes?”

“I want you, but I won’t *take* you, not like I have previously.” His hands tightened. She saw that his arms were shaking. “This time, I’m asking. Asking you to give yourself to me.”

All that was left...

Emotionally. All that was left of her, he was demanding. No...*asking*.

“Yes.”

Chapter Nine

The Conscience Goes the Way of the Coward (Poof! in a cloud of dust)

"Then roll over, woman."

Nash was humbled by how quickly she complied.

He gripped her arse with both hands and bent forward. Angling his head, he placed a kiss squarely on her mole. Her appealing, off-center and perfectly imperfect mole. He couldn't find a single fault with the rest of her body, so Nash figured his affinity for the unique mark made sense—he was so damn far from perfect, but still hoped to God she'd developed an affinity for him too.

He kissed the mole again, adding a little nip. When he straightened and slapped the spot his lips had just caressed, she squeaked her surprise. "Now roll back."

"Whatever do you mean?" She glanced over her shoulder while arching her lower body toward him. Invitation abounded. "Do you not want—"

Another slap. "Over, princess. On your bum."

Though hesitantly, Laney did as bade.

Never fuck facing forw –

Consigning his conscience to the devil once and for all, Nash closed the distance between them until their lips were but a kiss away. "Face-to-face this time, Laney. Do *you* not remember? I'm demonstrating how a man loves a woman. A special woman."

Her eyes grew wide but rather than wait for her reaction, Nash leveraged himself up, parted her knees and splayed her legs wide.

Shaking as if it were *his* first time, he positioned his cock at her quim, held himself steady with one hand and resisted the urge to sink in. But he did indulge in a little cock head exploration along her slit, agonizing though it was, and lowered his upper body until his lips were back at hers.

"Kiss me, princess?"

And as her mouth lunged upward, his cock plunged downward. Into hope.

Laney mashed her lips against Mr. Hammond's, experiencing the forceful glide of his tongue into her mouth the same moment his cock speared past her last defense, stretched tender flesh and lodged deep inside her cunny.

His chest came down, flattening her breasts, abrading her nipples. His hands wound in her hair and held her head steady for his slow assault.

Slow and tortuous. Both the paced motion of his tongue stroking along hers and the way his cock entered her quim. And stayed.

Swollen, delicate muscles yielded to hard, firm circumference. Finally, after waiting for what seemed an eternity, her lover was inside her body, surrounded by clutching, hungry, *loving* parts that, ironically, given the care and gentleness he was showing her, wanted to be *pummeled*.

Instead of telling him—for his lips and tongue were keeping her mouth delightfully occupied, Laney sought to show him. She sucked his tongue deep inside her mouth, tangled hers against it, pushing the flexible muscle into her teeth, tasting remnants of what she knew was her own release. Even when he groaned, she didn't ease the pressure. Instead, Laney grew bolder, raking her nails down his back and digging them into his flanks.

Despite her actions, Nash refused to respond how she'd hoped. His caresses remained feather soft, fingertips to her cheek, her forehead, his tongue and lips lovingly exploring her mouth when she stopped sucking on his in order to breathe. His cock stayed seated deep, stroking languidly in and out of her grasping passage, touching her in places she knew no other man ever could—or would.

But regardless of how treasured, how cherished or *special* his actions, Laney craved the fire that had branded their previous encounters. So she took matters into her own hands, scraping her nails over his buttocks. Ignoring his flinch and doing it again.

Her pussy writhed beneath his heavy frame, desperately trying to buck against him, to get more friction, more of *something*, but his weight kept her pinned.

Pinned?

Pins? *Hat* pins.

Threaten to use her precious hats for target practice, would he?

Promise to treat her body to considerate sexual *loving*, but holding a huge part of himself back?

Laney bit down on his exploring tongue. She scored her nails down his bum one last time then hauled off and slapped him. Reared back and did it again, popping his flanks and loving the sharp sound that blasted through the silence.

Loving more how he jerked. Growled. Ground his cock into her pussy and received the message—without her ever having to say a word.

His tongue changed texture, setting off all manner of sparks along the roof of her mouth. His cock stiffened even more—if that were possible—and sped up, lurching into her cunny faster and faster. Deeper and deeper.

Laney spanked him again, let her hands express all the frustration that came from years of just flowing through life, letting circumstances and those in authority sway her to their wishes, expelling the aggravation of always stifling her true self.

All the years of biting her tongue while she waited on ladies and did Mrs. Michaels bidding, followed by all the years of pretending to be a perfectly proper “lady” while living the life of a mistress—more pretending. The lies, the confusion, and yes, the fear—of being alone, of “seeing” the future and finding it very bleak indeed...

It all came pouring out of her every time the flat of her hand connected with his arse and it felt wondrous!

Her cunny felt wondrous!

Harder and harder he plunged inside, rubbing against the flexing muscles of her quim that kept trying to pull him closer then push him out.

His weight was heavy. Her chest hurt, compressed under his body. Her lips were tender, the bottom of her tongue sore from dueling with his, but still Laney kept driving him on, kept spanking his backside and rocking into his fierce thrusts, kept hearing the growls in his throat, noticed how his nails grew sharper, trickling along her scalp...felt his teeth *prick* her lip! And even as her clitoris cried out for his mouth and tongue again, even as her quim hugged his shaft so tight it was a marvel he could keep sliding at all, Laney realized she wasn't slapping him anymore to rid herself of her past. Her personal demons were gone.

She was slapping him for the present—to edge him on. Wilder. Fiercer. But alas, it seemed her efforts were no longer needed.

Mr. Hammond rolled to his back and brought her with him, still pumping inside. She was on top. She was in control, perhaps partially, but control nevertheless, riding him, her knees giving her the leverage that had been absent before. He tore his mouth from hers and aligned their cheeks. His breathing was loud, his jaw raspy again. "Like this, princess? Is this what you're after?"

And his hand landed on her right flank. Laney moaned and nodded, swiveling atop his pubic hairs, and he did it again, carving a place for his other hand between their bodies, touching the starving nub and stilling—leaving his fingers there for her to dance around, rock over...

Another slap. Harder. Louder.

Laney rode his cock, pressed that sensitive spot over his fingers, felt his hot breath at her ear, and held on. Faster her hips flew, faster his palm came down. Faster her heart beat, her blood flowed.

And then—

Then...

Then everything exploded at once.

The tiny knot he'd brought to life swelled, extended, retreated. Extended again then celebrated.

Her pussy clamped down and clutched.

Her bum smarted, burned and rejoiced.

Nash drove into her higher, slower, longer. And suddenly his arms were around her back and he was hugging her, lunging into her and murmuring over and over and over, "Don't leave. Don't leave me. Don't leave..."

* * * * *

Laney didn't know how much time had passed when she awoke, but she knew her stomach was protesting its lack of nourishment. Dappled shade covered their nude bodies, but that was all. She still hadn't broken her fast for the day and was hungry indeed. She'd been too keyed up after Reginald burst in on them and, well...she'd been rather occupied since, now hadn't she?

At another grumble from her neglected middle, Nash stirred beside her. A moment later he rose up on one elbow and looked down at her, hair in his face. "Appears I fell asleep."

She brushed it back. "We both did."

The track of the sun across the sky measured several hours by her estimation. Several hours since Nash Hammond had truly *loved* her, whether he realized it or not.

Suddenly shy, Laney reached across him for her dress.

Mr. Hammond caught her arm, brought it to his lips then halted. His grip tightened and he angled her arm away from the shade and into the light.

"What happened here?" His voice was colder than she'd ever heard it. "What did that bastard do to you?"

Laney tried to free her arm. "I knew I should've left my glove on."

Nash tensed. His hold didn't ease. "Laney?"

Already knowing what was there but wanting to see the scars as he saw them, she forced her gaze to her forearm. Two circular marks, not much larger than a silver twopence, one much deeper than the other. Jagged, uneven flesh, now a soft, shiny pink. Healing she knew, but still an ugly reminder of the position her indenture had put her in. Though one of the scars was fainter, she wasn't sure either would ever completely go away.

Instead of snarling a demand for explanations as she expected, Nash lifted her arm deliberately to his lips and kissed each spot. Then he did it again, the dry application of his lips healing her more profoundly than any number of treatments from Dr. Hanson's Cure-All Cream ever could.

The gesture also brought emotions welling to the surface. "Blighters, Mr. 'ammond," she sniffed, feeling all exposed and vulnerable. "You didn't make me act this way when you 'ad your 'ead between my legs nor your cock, but kiss me arm and I'm weepin' like—like..."

Her lips felt all swollen and wobbly.

Nash tugged her into his embrace, tingling arm and all. "Shhh. Princesses don't cry." He pressed his lips to her head. "Haven't you heard? It makes their crown fall off."

And then she was smiling through the tears because now her heart and her forehead were tingly too. "Aw, stop it. Me 'ead'll be too big for a crown, the way you go on."

His voice softened. "You don't have to tell —"

"Mr. Tate, 'e was good to me at first, 'e was," she interrupted, knowing she *did* have to tell him. But she needed to tell him as the adult Laney she'd grown into, not the little-girl-lost one she'd been. When she was sold into millinery slavery. While not horrible, being forced to leave every familiar place and person at only thirteen... Well, of a certainty, it *had* been horrible.

Mashing her lips together, Laney willed the excess of tears and emotion to dissipate. Four lungfuls of air later, she felt a fraction more composed. Mr. Hammond hadn't loosened his hold a fraction either, which helped immeasurably. "Reginald treated me grandly, at least initially, but recently, well, things changed between us. I'd always known he wanted me for his mistress. When I first moved in with him and he didn't try to touch me whenever we were alone, contrary to how much attention he showered on my body in public, I thought he was waiting for me to gain a year or two. But the more I observed between men and women, I finally realized he never really wanted me as his mistress in truth, he was just using me as a shield to keep his family from learning of his...male paramour."

Behind her, around her, he waited patiently, pure quiet strength supporting her while Laney composed herself to tell him the rest.

"A few months ago, he came to my bedchamber. I was...I'm ashamed to say, willing enough, but his body wasn't. After the first four attempts, I thought he'd given up." Laney also thought she detected more growling and gripped Mr. Hammond's hands tight, taking courage from his presence. She couldn't ever remember feeling so safe, not even when she'd locked herself in her room and seen Reginald leave the house. Never in fact.

Secure for once, both in body and mind, she whispered what she hadn't told another. "Then he tried it again with more...*force* and I ran. Only to have him bring me back. I really had nowhere to go, Mary had just moved from London and Reginald found me at the first place he looked—Bailey's Sweet Shop, just off Bond. I have a deplorable weakness for Bailey's, I must confess. Mr. Tate profusely apologized and promised to leave me alone." She expelled a heartfelt sigh. "I almost believed him too."

Mr. Hammond relaxed his hold and shifted until her back rested against the quilt. Hovering over her, he traced one eyebrow, feathered his thumb down her cheek and held his hand there. "The rest?" His voice was tight. "Your arm? This journey? I know you weren't with him willingly. I smelled your fear."

That was news. "Well, I smell something delicious in that basket and want a taste."

She attempted to roll away, but he caught her, held her firmly to quilt, flat on her back. "Finish your tale without delay. Procrastinating will only make it loom larger."

As if it weren't already large enough. Focusing on the muscles of his chest, she concluded quickly. "By now, he'd stopped associating with his friend Neils and had begun drinking copious amounts of strong spirits. That and consorting with an entirely new caliber of *friends*. Men his brother introduced him to, men who smirked at me when they visited, as if they knew something I didn't. Men who appeared to be

prodding Reginald toward his downfall. And mine. The last time I left the house without his permission—and this only to post a letter to Mary—he *persuaded* me upon my return not to do so again.”

Laney held up her arm then let it drop. “Truly, I don’t think he’s cruel, just confused.”

“He’s a mollified piece of horse dung, and if I ever cross paths with him again, I vow to you he won’t be in a position to hurt another female as long as he lives.” As hard as his words, his touch remained whisper soft, tracing over her jaw, her chin. “I swear it.”

“Thank you. I appreciate the sentiment more than you know, but I don’t believe that’ll be necessary. I’m fairly certain he’ll be heading abroad before the month is out. Shh,” she continued, hearing the snarl begin in his throat. “Shh. He didn’t harm me permanent—”

“He scarred you permanently.”

“But not on the inside, not anymore.”

Nash evaluated her arm. “Hmm. An imperfection in the perfect princess. Kind of you to point it out.”

She laughed. “I’m far from perfect—look at me, hiding from the world as I was, attaching those preposterous veils to every one of my hats.”

“Ah, so you realize that now, do you?”

“I do.” She nodded, felt the quilt beneath her head and raised a hand to his warm chest. “But that doesn’t give you leave to shoot my hats.”

“We’ll decide that at a later date—there *is* the matter of a single dueling pistol that was left in my room. There’s a certain ironic satisfaction to be had, honing my skills on his hat.”

“But not mine?”

“I am relieved to hear you’re ready to set them aside.”

That was no answer, but she was too content to argue. “If only I’d faced the truth sooner—about Reginald and myself, I wouldn’t have landed in this predicament.”

“Well, I for one am grateful for *this predicament*.” Nash sat up and tugged her into his lap—his hard, *naked* lap. “And don’t belabor the point too finely—we all hide from something, do we not? Me? I’ve been hiding from myself for more years than I want to count.”

She explored his kneecap...just as his palms gave every appearance of exploring down her hips and thighs. “Now that you’ve broached it, won’t you please tell me about *yourself*—your body—why and how you’re able to...” She left off fondling his leg to make a sweeping gesture that included his entire form behind her. “It isn’t possible, what you do, but I’ve seen it, twice now—”

His hands stopped roving and he brought his jaw to the crook of her shoulder. “Twice? Explain yourself, princess, then I’ll return the favor.”

She turned her head and eyed him. He'd demanded everything be stated plainly. Could she do any less? "To clarify, so that I'm not continuing—or explaining—under any misapprehensions, you'll tell me how you're able to become a cat?"

A beat...then, "I will."

As long as she was bringing things out into the open... "And have you ever before shared this extraordinary tale with another?"

The gleam was back, along with his relaxed hands, which took up residence on the inside of her legs, just above her knees. "My family knows. There are others who bear my curse as well, but," his fingers splayed, "if you're asking in a circuitous way whether I've told another woman, then the answer is an unequivocal no. Do you feel suitably special now?"

"I felt *special* earlier," Laney leaned back against his chest and let her legs fall open, hoping he'd take the hint, "but this reinforces it. I suppose there's nothing for it, then. Very well. Family curses. Interesting things, family curses."

When his fingers refused her invitation, Laney shot him a look over her shoulder, gauging his receptivity. Only interest shone in his eyes, no ridicule or doubt. No grandiose dose of lust, either. Well what did she expect? Just because her rebellious insides were becoming all tingly and itchy again didn't mean his *outsides* were doing the same. Blighters!

"Curses?" he prompted.

"Grandmum always said it was a blessing being a visionary. Mum called it the work of the devil."

Nash abandoned her leg and took one of her hands to align their palms. His long fingers outdistanced hers significantly. "Perhaps because the 'blessing' skipped her generation?"

"Plausible theory, but no. Pa was Grandmum's son. An accident in the fields took him when I was a babe. Grandmum told him not to go out that day, but Mum insisted he'd lose his job otherwise. I think that's why she was always so bitter."

"It's difficult, I know, giving credence to things you don't understand," he brought their connected hands to the quilt, placed hers palm down and began tracing over and between each finger, "but you've yet to tell me—"

"About us. I know. I have a tendency to ramble when I don't want to say something."

"Ramble on, princess. I've nowhere pressing I need to be." His other hand was combing through her hair as he demonstrated with his every action that the gentle lover she'd lain with after their first night hadn't been conjured by her secret desire for tenderness but was very real indeed. Laney sighed at her remarkable present, thankful all over again for the rain, Reginald's impatience and her fortuitous seat on that particular stage.

She stared out at their little slice of meadowy heaven. Surrounded by tall, thick trees, tufts of grass, weeds and flowers, all beaten down by the recent rains, but now working to stand tall in the light of a new day.

Laney could do no less. Firming her resolve, she confided, "I've told you how Mr. Tate changed in his actions and demeanor the last few months, but what brought my dire circumstances into immediate focus is that two weeks ago...I witnessed my wake."

"Your *wake*?"

"In a vision, to be precise. I was...dead."

Laney couldn't prevent the tremor that went through her when she said "dead" out loud, remembered the clarity with which she'd seen her body on the floor, cold and stiff. The tremors Nash immediately absorbed with his embrace. "The way things were progressing, I'd known it was only a matter of time before Reginald maimed me permanently or succeeded in raping me—by then I was no longer willing—but that particular vision added an element of desperation to my already desperate situation. I realized then that if I stayed with him, he'd eventually kill me."

His entire body drew taut. "That sodding bastard."

"Mr. Hammond!"

A pent up breath burst from his lips. "And now? Has that outcome been averted with certainty? Or what about the possibility that your vision was wrong? Maybe you were mistaken."

"When I showed signs of being a visionary, Grandmum explained how they only reflect the outcome should a current situation continue on course. That's proven to be my experience as well. Whenever I take action or advise someone and they listen and make an effort to alter the direction they're heading, I invariably see another, altogether different outcome."

"Dead? God, Laney." His arms tightened and he pressed a kiss to her shoulder.

"When Reginald woke me that morning and ordered me to gather my belongings, he wouldn't tell me where we were going or for how long, but I sensed it was my last chance to escape. I didn't know what awaited us at the end of the journey, but the peril inherent in it dogged my every step."

"Why me? What in God's name made you approach me?"

"Oh heavens." And she scrambled from his lap, twisted around and knelt on the quilt facing him, trying unsuccessfully to keep the embarrassment from her face.

"Yes?" At her obvious mortification, his features relaxed. "I gather that 'oh heavens' portends something scandalous the way you're blushing." His voice fairly sparkled. His eyes did too.

"If you must know..."

"Oh believe me, I must. Tit for cat and all that."

She laughed. Here she was, recounting the most horrifying times of her life and she laughed.

But exactly how much did she share? Laney realized he was avidly watching her every move and blinked slowly, weighing her words. "I saw us—you and me—mmm...shall we say, in an indelicate position and realized if it *were* a vision, then it meant that you came to my rescue. It seemed to me the only way for that to occur, given how fiercely you scowled from your dark corner in the coach, was if I approached you and asked."

"Today?"

Flummoxed, she queried, "Today *what*?"

He glanced at the quilt then the shadowed area hidden between her bent legs. "Today's indelicate position? What we've been doing here—is that what you saw?"

Laney shifted until her knees pressed together, reveled in how his gaze immediately rose to her breasts. "Nooooo."

"This morning, then? Before Tate barged in?" Like a predator, Nash climbed to his knees and advanced, placing one hand on her thigh.

"Not this morning, either." She tensed beneath his touch and swayed toward him.

Nash brought his other hand to her waist. "Last night? The night before that?"

"Neither."

He drew closer. "Going to remain tightlipped about this?"

"It's required, I'm afraid," she said with mock regret, coming to her knees so that their torsos meshed. She clasped her hands behind his neck. "*A true lady always seeks to cultivate secrets*. That's the only way to ensure a gentleman's interest beyond the moment."

He pressed her lips together and raised one eyebrow. "Where did that balderdash originate?"

Laney decided he didn't have to know that *everything* she knew about ladylike behavior came from Mary. Let him think she was the brilliant one. Although *brilliance* and *balderdash* didn't exactly go hand in hand, now did they?

"Determined to retain a bit of mystery, are you?" he said, lifting her up and swinging around until he fell back against the quilt with her in the crook of his arm. One powerful, hairy leg snared hers, forestalling any retreat—not that Laney had plans for anything of the sort. "Even though this *gentleman* has already expressed his interest? In any infinite manner of *interesting* ways?"

"Does it bother you?" And more because she wanted to know how he might answer, rather than because she really felt the need to, Laney asked, "May I not keep a part of me to myself?"

He sighed. "Were we both...*happy* in this indelicate vision of yours?"

"Exceedingly."

He grunted and she stifled a laugh.

"Was it...*after* the other vision you told me about? The one of your wake? Is that something you're at liberty to share, my lady of mystery?"

She thought back to how she'd looked in the gazebo, how her curves had matured. Their talk of children. "Oh yes. I can confidently set your mind at ease on that count."

Nash marveled at the beauty in his arms, at the beauty inherent in this particular day. Had he ever felt such peace? Doubtful.

So she wanted to claim the title Lady of Mystery? If he could always hold her thus, he'd agree to anything.

"Very well." A gossamer thread descending from a branch overhead snagged his attention, the spider at its end coming closer and closer as it spun the silken line. "You said if it *were* a vision, then it meant that I rescued you. A vision as opposed to what, I'm wondering?"

"A daydream?" she squeaked, playing with the fine sheen of hair currently covering his chest.

Never ceased to amaze him, how the amount of hair on his chest and jaw changed depending on his moods, state of arousal and the seasons. At least he didn't grow hair on his palms! Something to be thankful for, whether he owed his appreciation to the sun gods, the African healer or plain old-fashioned luck—or maybe just *Panthera leo* because come to think on it, the wild cats didn't boast hair on their pads either.

The spider continued its downward track, nearing on a collision course with Laney's naked bosom. Still too far to reach though, unless he moved, which wasn't in his immediate plans.

To someone who rarely took the time to ask the name of a wench before he fucked her, much less spent any effort seeking to know anything about her beyond the juncture of her legs, he'd certainly evolved, now hadn't he? At least beyond the primitive state of brute he'd wallowed in for years.

Just watching the way Laney's delicate fingers delved through the dark hairs on his stomach, feeling both her nails and fingertips exploring his muscle and bone, well...the experience did something to him—made *him* daydream, night dream, fantasize about the future.

A future in which he could always fuck *facing forward*, unless the mood struck him otherwise of course, and one in which *his* dreams were truly possible. The ones of family, a ladylike wife—when in public, that is. In private, she could be as bawdy and naughty as...as...the delightful contradiction lodged in his arms whose hand had reached his groin.

"Daydream, eh?" he forestalled further exploration by anchoring her hand with his, still keeping an eye on the spider. So she'd been thinking of sex with him from the onset? His nostrils flared, recalling the scent of her arousal. Knowing now it had been for him and not Tate only made his dick flare as well. Strokes to his ego abounded, so did the spider—bounding lower and lower. "Just what wicked, indelicate position did that innocent mind of yours conjure?"

Weaving spiders, come not here... When it got within arm's reach, he'd –

But Laney beat him to it, casually lifting her hand, pinching the silken thread he wasn't even aware *she'd* been aware of and depositing the little eight-legged bugger in the grass. Calmly as she pleased. Batting the spider away with less care than she'd bat a silk fan.

The action raised all manner of questions. "Thought you detested spiders."

"Mmm?"

"That first night when you crashed into me, you said bugs were loathsome creatures if I recall."

"I did, did I?"

Stalling again, that much was obvious, but for what purpose? "I thought we agreed no more hiding."

Laney rolled over and propped her arms on his chest. Nash bit back the *oompf* the sharp points of her elbows brought to his lips and waited.

"Another dark vision, I'm afraid. I'd just decided if you wouldn't assist me, then there was no help for it—I'd escape on my own. I started plotting and *boom!* God, the universe, maybe Cornish pixies...I don't know, but some deity to whom I'm forever indebted thought otherwise and showed me the error of my ways. Quite disturbingly, I might add." She toyed with the hollow in his throat, avoiding his gaze, but then her lips curved into a smile and she lifted her eyes. "So I didn't run. I came to you instead and here we are."

Here we are indeed. Nash contemplated inquiring as to the content of this "dark, disturbing vision" but something in her relaxed demeanor held him back. Why spoil such a lovely moment? Lovely, disregarding the dagger-status of those elbows. *Unless...*

"So were I to leave right now, you'd still be safe from Tate? Can you assure me of that?" *Assure yourself?*

She caught her breath. Her fingers froze over the column of his throat. "I believe so, yes. Is that..." *What you want?*

He heard what she didn't voice. Hell no, it wasn't what he wanted, but neither was he confident after everything was confided between them, that *she* would want to stay. "Ah, but if I left, then our 'exceedingly happy' future wouldn't come to pass, correct?"

"In all likelihood, it would not."

"My brain more busy than the labouring spider..." Nash made a pondering noise, one that was meant to alleviate the tension in her fingers, as well as the lump in his throat. "I cannot recall ever being *exceedingly* happy."

"Oh? And...?"

He smiled into her gravely serious features. "Believe I'd like very much to give it a try."

Relief washed over her expression and her hands went around his neck, her fingers delving into his hair, her thumbs into the bottom of his throat, when sudden curiosity filled her gaze. "Why do you do that, mutter such eloquent phrases at times?"

"There's ample time to read when I journey. The plays by William Shakespeare are among my favorites."

"I've never been to see one of his plays, but to know so very much, you must read frequently."

And now she had him by the tail – and tonsils. "I've been alone frequently."

"Not anymore, I do hope, and I like your recitations, exceedingly so." The minx smiled. Her innocent appreciation warmed everything in him. "You sound magnificent when you do that but, um, isn't it your turn to offer up explanations, Mr. Hammond? I seem to recall the intriguing matter of curses and *cats*."

"Ah yes." Not quite innocent. Or feeble-brained either – no forgetting here. He sighed against the pressure of her fingers. "Very well."

"But before you tell me, may I please avail myself of one of those sweet breads from inside the basket?"

As the woven lid was still securely closed, he couldn't help but prod, "How do you know what's inside? Did you *envision* yourself eating it?"

"No, you wretch. I've been smelling gingerbread cakes and black butter ever since I woke and if you don't share..." She leaned over him, aiming for the basket. Nash beat her to it, holding it out of reach while she climbed up his chest, arm outstretched. "Mr. Hammond!"

"You'll what? Forcefully apply your palm to my flesh and spank me again?"

Face flaming, she scrambled off and sat on the opposite corner of the quilt. Discomfited or not, he saw the grin that wouldn't be repressed. "Invitation, my good man?" Pursing her lips, she tried again – unsuccessfully – to wipe the smile from her face. "If you don't feed me posthaste, I vow I'll eat every square of cake and every dollop of black butter, leaving you with nary a crumb."

Nash rolled to a sitting position and placed the basket on the quilt as a peace offering. "You'll need to threaten another punishment, princess, for I'll be most pleased to make do with the wine and cheese. Tut, tut," he told her when she bypassed the basket and reached toward her dress. "Remain you as you are."

"But I'm naked!"

"As am I." If he kept her nude, she wouldn't run. At least not without giving him a chance to complete his explanations. He'd never hated the thought of baring his soul more. "Do you not appreciate the freedom inherent in being alone together like this especially after being cooped up in that damp stage for days? Do you not want to celebrate *your* freedom?" He waved to the secluded clearing they occupied. "What better way?"

"There is that, you wicked man." With a small huff, she abandoned her clothing search and assumed a sensually languorous pose at his feet, stretching out on her stomach and kicking one foot playfully in the air while propping her upper body on her elbows.

Nash whistled his appreciation and placed one gingerbread cake at her fingertips. Laney turned her head and flashed him a splendid smile through her thick hair—all but the one section still haphazardly pinned near her nape now cascaded over her shoulders and pooled on the quilt. "You've also given me the freedom to be naughty. That warrants celebration, wouldn't you think?"

Oh he did.

"But I'm still not completely certain how I feel being attired or *not* attired out here, where just anyone could traipse by."

He wanted to tangle his fingers in the glossy mass. He wanted to love her all over again.

"Mr. Hammond?"

He cleared a throat gone dry. "Trust me when I tell you my hearing is such that were a single foot to trod beyond yon path, I would know and have us both shielded before anyone ever reached the creek." Grabbing a hunk of cheese and the wine bottle, Nash scooted the basket off the quilt and joined her, lying on his stomach after a quick twitch of his hips, rearranging his cock. He reached for that luscious curtain of black hair, brushing it behind one ear and noticed she had yet to take a bite. "What are you waiting for?"

"You."

That damn spark—the one centered in his chest—flared to life again and he determinedly put it out. He had no cause getting all tingly or *sparkly* over her, when she likely wouldn't retain her seductive, receptive demeanor much longer. He'd be lucky if he made it through the time it took her to enjoy her first two cakes.

"Eat away." Saluting her with a piece of blue Stilton, Nash turned his attention to the view. The trees? Bah. The stubby grass? Bah. The brilliant blue sky overhead dotted with the occasional cloud? Double bah. *Laney's arse*? Nash swore he could hear the hallelujah chorus praising each divinely inspired inch of her creamy, rounded derrière.

While she devoured her cake and asked for another, the cheese crumbled to dust in his mouth. Even cheese as good as this—reminiscent of the Gorgonzola he'd developed a taste for in Italy—paled in comparison to what he *could* be savoring...

Long, shapely legs, those tempting toes still pointed and waving in the air snared his attention. He admired the feminine display then realized for the first time how unfashionably long her hair was, how the coal black strands crisscrossed over her shoulders and down her back, the tips stopping just at the point where those delicious dimples heralded the rounded cheeks of her bottom...just inches above that mole.

"Do you not want to share?" She offered him the last bite of honey cake.

Nash swallowed, wiped his lips and continued evaluating her arse. "I'll wait on that. I prefer to eat one thing at a time before moving on to the next."

"That's...odd."

"Odd?" After everything else he had to confess, she'd think his eating habits were more typical than taking afternoon tea with the king.

"Come now, Mr. Hammond. You've been quiet long enough," she said, rising to her knees and leaning forward to search the basket until pulling forth the dish of black butter. "Though I grant you it's liberating to be dining stript to the skin as we are, and I'm sure it could easily lead to any number of delightful conversations and intimate actions," her voice had gone all smoky, "won't you please tell me about *your* family blessing?"

"Blessing, eh?" The smell of spiced, sauced apples filled the air when she began dipping the honey cake into the spread. His cheese all but forgotten, Nash applied himself to de-corking the wine. "Is that what you're calling it now?"

Her tongue came out and swiped the smear of black butter covering her bottom lip. His eyes went from the container of mashed apples to her arse. Nash's gut clenched, hands flexed around the neck of the wine bottle.

"Certainly. For the word *curse* has such a gloomy connotation, don't you think? And as exceed—"

"As exceedingly happy people, we may no longer be gloomy?" Miraculous, wasn't it, how normal his voice could sound when he was strangling on renewed desire?

"Precisely."

The cork popped free and he caught it with one hand. "You, princess, are a prime piece."

"And you, my dear prince, are stalling."

"Precisely."

"Hmm." Evidently willing to allow him time, she took another bite, swallowed, licked those damnably luscious lips and asked, "Do you not want to try a honey cake? The gingerbread was good, but I vow these must be the best I've ever tasted."

"Perhaps later after I'm done with the cheese." *And you.* After downing several gulps of wine in the guise of seeking courage, he offered her the bottle.

She swallowed her last bite. "Do we not have glasses?"

"Who needs 'em?"

"Indeed." Laney reached for the bottle and took a sip, spilling more down her chin and on the quilt than landed in her mouth. "Oh dear! I fear I'm not in the best position to drink."

When she tried to sit up, Mr. Hammond parked one hand securely between her shoulder blades. Heeding his unspoken wish, she relaxed back onto their pallet. When it didn't appear he was going to say—or do—anything else, she offered a gambit. "You

are aware that you took an extraordinarily long time to come after me this morning. I was afraid you'd decided not to."

He claimed the bottle and climbed over her, straddling her thighs. "Dare I confess why?"

Her bum twitched at his proximity...at that of his cock. "Though I may regret asking, do expound upon it, if you please. A girl likes to know the true reason when a gentleman keeps her waiting."

Cold liquid drizzled down her spine. "So now I'm a *gentleman*, am I?"

Laney tightened every muscle to keep from flying off the quilt. "Only for the purposes of this particular conversation!" She squeaked when he leaned forward and his tongue lapped at the wine. "Afterward, it too may be up for discussion. *It* being your status as a gentleman."

He spoke against her shoulder. "Well, Miss Buckley, this gentleman wasn't able to arrive in a timely manner because he was all *amort*."

"All-a-what?"

"Struck dumb by your beauty. 'What, sweeting, all *amort*?' " he intoned, sounding amazingly somber for one who was drinking wine off her back.

"Oh-mmm, what a rapper!"

"What? You doubt I could be confounded by the sheer wonder of gazing upon your countenance? 'Tis true." She looked over her shoulder and watched as he winked at her and tipped the bottle into his mouth, gulping down several swallows.

Tossing her head as if tossing off his Spanish coin, Laney nevertheless felt warmed all over by his compliments. A second later, she sizzled all over when he brought his lips to her spine and released the heated liquid over her skin. Before it could drizzle completely down her sides, he quickly laved it away, saying amidst wet kisses, "That stalled me more than once this morning, I'll have you know, coming to terms with the prize in my bed, but the principal reason this gentleman didn't greet you sooner is because he couldn't exit his room."

"Seems an odd affliction to have." She couldn't stop her bum from arching toward him. Her skin met that of his hairy thighs. "One must merely turn the handle and step through the doorway."

"Difficult to do, princess, when one is *still a cat*."

Laney wiggled fingers over her head like a stage show magician waving his cane. "Why didn't you just change back?"

He growled and she felt more wine trickle down her back, lower this time. "Because I didn't know how to accomplish that seemingly simple feat."

"But I've seen—" She broke off when he lowered his entire body, scraping his chest along her backside and continuing to lap at the wine, licking just above her quivering buttocks.

In between licks and kisses, he murmured, "Continue. Exactly what *have* you seen?"

Her pussy tilted into the quilt. "Hmm...in order to cultivate that alluring mystery we agreed I may retain, I'm not sure precisely how much I want to share... *Mmm.*"

"Busy cultivating, are you?"

"Interruptions will get me nowhere."

"Forgive me," he said with mock contriteness, which was belied by the way his hands eased under her stomach and edged toward her breasts. "Do go on."

Laney spread her legs, ignoring the twinges of soreness, hoping for more friction. Hoping he'd *do* more. "I've most definitely seen you in the future *as a cat* and you didn't appear to have any difficulty making the transition. Though I'm thinking *cat* may not be the correct word." She felt his nose—at least she thought it was his nose, seeing as how both his outstretched arms had just reached her breasts—sniffing along the seam of her bum. "It's, ah, a different species altogether, isn't it? I saw pictures once. A cheetah, if I'm not mistaken?"

"Cheetah?" Offended to his very soul, Nash nipped her butt. "So the lady considers me a *cheetah*?"

"Calm yourself, Mr. Hammond. I certainly never accused you of being a cheater. A wretch, a scoundrel, a cad perhaps, but never—"

He nipped again. "The sun-loving, lazy bloke above you is certainly no cheetah. And in case you're wondering, I don't cheat at cards, either."

Nash tightened his hands around her breasts, felt the points of her nipples poking into his palms. The scents buried between the cheeks of her arse turned him to stone. "Care to try again?"

On a groan, "Lynx?"

"You're getting farther off the mark." Giving her nipples one serious tweak, he slid his hands from beneath her torso and grabbed the dish of black butter, placing it within reach. "Didn't your learned friend teach you any better?"

Given how her entire body started quaking and the muted giggles emitting from her, Laney appeared to be enjoying her own private amusement. "I'd be outright lyin' if I said I didn't remember."

Nash wondered at the source of her mirth, especially given the position of his hands—which had just gripped her buttocks and spread them wide—and his face, which was centered above the most beautiful pink anus...when it dawned. "Lyin'. *Lion*? And you have the ballocks to call *me* wretched?"

"You're supposed to be telling me of your family bless— Ah! Why do you seek to distract me with...mmm..."

"My tongue?"

"Mr. 'ammond!"

Her earlier cream had combined with his release and dripped down between her legs. From his position, Nash had easy access to it all. In between licking forays, he told

her, "If you cannot bring yourself to call me by a name other than *mister*, I'm going to have to think up one myself."

"It's only because I—" Her breath caught when he slid his mouth to the side and sunk his teeth into one creamy globe. "Hold you in such high esteem."

"High esteem, eh?" Did he have her bamboozled. "I question how worthy I am of your regard, but—"

"Stop talking," she groaned, raising her arse to his lips.

"As the lady wishes..." Without further ado, Nash dipped his fingers in the black butter and swiped them down the dark crevice between her cheeks. He took a gulp of wine and leaned in, licking straight down toward her anus, devouring the sharp tang of fermented fruit, buttery spiced apples and the unique tastes and textures of Laney's equally delectable arse.

He brought his arms up and anchored them over her lower back to keep her in place—not that she was fighting him. Nash pushed and prodded his tongue into every crevice it could find...the little depression at the very top of her crack, around the puckered, flexing ring, *inside* her hole.

Her whimpered squeaks mixed with his heartfelt moans as his cock frigged between her closed legs. Fingers splayed wide, he grasped for purchase, dug his hands into her sides while his tongue licked and lapped at her arching, rocking derrière. Had he ever tasted fruit so intoxicating?

Nostrils flaring, Nash pressed his face to her butt and inhaled. He was boosey over her, as cup-shot as if he'd swilled three entire bottles of wine. No, make that six. Drunk on the most intriguing baggage to ever cross his blighted path.

His cock flailed between her legs—legs she suddenly widened, changing her angle, grinding her pussy into the quilt. One of her hands snaked under her torso and he moved to assist, releasing his hold on her waist and sliding his arm under her pelvis, easily finding her fingers, nudging them out of the way and pressing his hand to her clitoris.

The tiny pearl protruded, eagerly greeting his touch. She rose and fell beneath him, thrashing her quim over his fingers. A low thrumming started at the base of his cock, spread outward, encompassing his ballocks, his entire abdomen... His hips pumped faster, dragging his cock along the quilt, his tongue delved deeper and Laney groaned, stiffened and then released in a torrent that gushed past his fingers, soaking his hand and the quilt.

Nash withdrew his tongue, bit the side of her arse, kissed it then straightened onto his knees and straddled her legs. Stroking his rigid erection with one hand, he flipped her to her back with the other. She rolled over with a lethargic whimper.

Eyes closed, face flushed, Laney licked her bottom lip and smiled, settling back into the quilt.

He needed to see her when she came, needed to watch the expressions on her face. Needed to imprint the experience in his mind in case it didn't occur again. He grappled

for the wine bottle, curved his fingers around the neck and placed the side of the slick glass between her legs and against her quim. Her eyes flew open, the verdant depths flaring with interest. "Still thirsty, are we?"

Shaking from his need to climax, Nash rasped out, "I want you to come again, while I watch."

Kneeling over her, he fisted his formidable erection and watched as first with hesitation then with growing delight, Laney assumed control of the bottle and rubbed the glass over her slippery folds.

The blush returned to her breasts almost instantly. Her previously mellowed breathing accelerated to panted gasps before he'd gotten a good ten strokes in. He saw how bright red, swollen and *wet* her juicy cunt was. Tasted her arse on his tongue and he blasted off like a cannon, spraying semen as if it were shot over her upper thighs and midnight curls. Everywhere that bottle wasn't, his seed laid claim.

His cock relaxed marginally, still stiff and straining to be *inside*, but he'd sworn to himself to give her body a chance to recover. To give her a chance to deny him—once and for all—after she heard what else he needed to expunge from his soul.

As if his own release triggered hers, Laney tensed her thighs and lifted her butt off the quilt, rubbing the bottle in a frenzy against her pussy. Her lower body undulated like waves in a storm, riding the glass with her cunt...those puffy, pouting lips spread on either side. When some of her cream trickled from the bottom edge, Nash licked his lips, felt his cock lurch once more in his hand. He tightened his fingers at the base and grabbed his ballocks with his other hand and squeezed himself as if squeezing the very life out.

Laney sent a moan toward the heavens and climaxed again, her damn juices dripping off the bottle and between her legs faster than he could blink. Unable to stop himself, Nash released his shaft and dove forward. Wrenching the bottle out of the way, he licked every bit of her slick pussy, swallowing down her desire. Taking her inside himself and only just then noticing how the feline atoms of his being had been completely absent from their entire encounter. That realization started him to shaking all over again. How was it, with this one particular female, he could enjoy the ability to simply be a *man*? A man loving a woman...

But he still didn't have the right to love.

Her slowly contracting pussy slid along his face and Nash kissed it all, the roaring in his ears finally abating enough for him to hear her whispered, "I was so very wrong before."

His entire body humming from his release—from hers—he willed his heart and breathing to slow. With one last swallow, Nash pulled away and her bottom sank to the quilt, flinching at the wet fabric. Grabbing her and rolling them both to a dry section, he secured his arms around her back, forced himself to hold her gaze and ask, "Wrong about what?"

Perched atop him as she was, he felt her inner trembling. It mirrored his own.

Tracing one finger over the twin scars on his lips, she said, "I'm ashamed to admit I always thought it wouldn't matter who I took into my body, that one man wasn't any better or worse than another, as long as they fed me and gave me a safe place to sleep every night."

Safe? "Did you feel safe with Tate?"

Her eyes flicked to his. "For the most part. Until recently. But I'm not talking about him, you cad, I'm talking about this."

"This?" Being more naked and exposed and vulnerable than he ever had in his life? Did she feel it too? "Define 'this', if you please."

"That regardless of who owned me, and by extension my allegiance and...and..." She looked away and finished in a rush. "Owned my body, I couldn't have done this with anyone else. You've shown me how, no matter the similarities in, um, coupling parts, the actual procedure and outcome can vary significantly and I'm ever so grateful it was you."

"Me? Procedure?" *Coupling parts*? Despite his hammering heart, Nash stifled a laugh. Only Laney! "What are you attempting to say?"

She caught his gaze again. "I just said it."

"My dear, if I'm understanding you correctly, you've reduced intimate love play to the mundaneness of having a rotten tooth extracted."

"But do you not see?" She sounded so earnest, her words and expression at odds with how her body still quivered in the aftermath, how his did as well, that he tried to remain equally solemn. "I'm expressing my joy and appreciation that you were the one to introduce me to such...personal delights and —"

"Personal delights?" Nash did laugh at that, solemn proving impossible.

"Now you're just being contrary on purpose." Her eyes narrowed at his continued humor and Nash sought to compose himself. "Truly, Mr. Hammond, I cannot fathom the void that would have been left in my life had I not known of this. I'm so grateful my initial convictions were wrong."

"I must admit your words are all a rumpus to me. Exactly *what* are you declaring a wrongness about?"

She stiffened, left off toying with his mouth and dug one toenail into his shin. "That I was so very wrong about it simply being something anyone could do. That it —"

"It?"

"Tiffing, tugging, priggish, you rotten beast! You know I'm talking about us rubbing bellies and I'll extract *your* teeth if you don't quit mocking me."

Nash took pity on her — and his abused shin. "Forgive me. Do go on, please. I wish to hear the rest."

Her foot relaxed. "You've shown me that it *does* so intensely matter who I give my body to. Not just legal keeping, mind you, but into your *care*."

While he still didn't grasp every morsel of what she'd just proclaimed, the basic gist was clear enough and it warmed him straight through the years of loneliness and isolation. Burnt them away as if they'd happened in another lifetime entirely. And the more he thought on it, they had.

The lifetime before Laney.

Chapter Ten

The Confession and the Crown

"Thank you for that. I...I hope I prove worthy of your esteem," he said without a hint of amusement then captured her lips in a bruising kiss.

Taken aback by his sudden intensity, Laney was nevertheless delighted by Mr. Hammond's eager response after her fumbling declaration. Made a hash of it, she did, expressing her wonder at all he'd shown her, but there it was. Who knew she could be so wicked when it came to matters of the flesh? Her mum would have expired on the spot. Grandmum would've cheered.

Laney followed Nash Hammond's lead and kissed him back with all the desperation he was showing her, that perplexing *Don't leave* he'd uttered only moments before still imprinted on her mind.

Where did he think she was going?

Nowhere, *ever*, if she had any say.

He shifted until they were both on their sides and continued his voracious kiss. His tongue surged within her mouth, as if searching out her secrets, exposing them and making them his own. She held on to his strong shoulders and gave him everything she had, praying it was enough.

After a minute, his lips gentled, his tongue calming until he ended their connection with little pecks along her lips. Little pecks that kept crisscrossing her mouth...never stopping...

He was avoiding her again. Stalling. After admitting she knew he could change into a cat, what could be left? Better to blow with the wind, to her way of thinking, and bring everything out now rather than worry, wait and wonder, likely building things up bigger than a gollumpus.

Reluctantly, Laney brought her hands to the sides of his face. Her fingernails anchored into his side-whiskers, leaving her thumbs free to edge toward his lips. At the action, he leaned back, blinking at her. His lips were wet. They looked swollen, like hers felt. Only he looked *guilty* as Hades. "What is it, Mr. Hammond? What has you in such a sad trim?"

He held her gaze, his eyes full of shadows and self-loathing. When she touched his mouth, he mashed his beautiful lips together, obliterating the two slashes she'd traced with her tongue only seconds before. A quick shake of his head was his only response. Laney relaxed one hand and brushed it through his hair, petting him. After what they'd just done—what she'd let him lick!—there was no way he was getting away without telling her something. Neither did she truly think he wanted to—a mere female couldn't

stop one as strong as him from doing anything he chose. But Laney wanted his love and knew that first she needed to gain his trust.

Her fingers returned to his lips, caressing over them until they unclenched. The old scars stood out in stark relief. "When we met, you looked absolutely abysmal." Much as he did now. "Why was that?"

Retreating, he flopped on his back and stared up through the leaves until he hid his face under one arm. The other was still lodged beneath her waist and Laney had no intention of moving a muscle. Not yet anyway.

"Mr. Hammond?"

Bitterly, he said, "And herein lies the first test of our sharing tales."

"And tails," she said suggestively, trailing a finger down his exposed hip until encountering his bare bum. "Do tell."

That brought a quirk to his mouth and a slight shift until he was staring at her with one eye. "Exceedingly happy indeed if I can smile when I'm about to confess my second-darkest secret."

"Second-darkest? Oh my. Of a certainty, if you've given them rankings, they must weigh heavily." Laney propped herself up, crooking one arm under her head and placing the other directly over his pounding heart. "I'll endeavor to wait patiently then, until you're ready to tell me, though inside I am a seething cauldron of impatience."

The arm under her waist curved until his fingertips touched her bum. "I'd like to know the inside of your seething cauldron again, but—"

Breaking off, he wrenched his arm out from under her. Full of that impatience she'd claimed but hadn't really felt, he sat up, anchoring one bent leg in front of him. His arm curved around it and she watched his fist clench and unclench.

Peering down at her through the fall of hair that buffeted his expression, he finally said, "Why did I look like a sad hound the day we met? Because I did the most heinous thing just hours before. Not that it excuses anything, but the curse that alters my form is strongest when the sun is in Leo."

"In Leo?" Laney followed suit and sat up, careful to keep from crowding him, as if giving a wild animal room to run. An illusion only. "Forgive me but I know nothing about astrology, I'm afraid."

"Or astronomy either, it appears." His head angled toward the sun, partially blocked by the overhead branches. "The crux of my family curse is this—for a few weeks every year, all of the males battle outside forces. Inside forces, perhaps. I'm uncertain which—maybe it's both, but annually once we reach twenty-five, we're cursed while the sun passes through the constellation of Leo, the lion."

He left off scrutinizing the sky and reached for his pantaloons. "The exact days change from year to year, but basically from early August until the middle of September I battle a monster. I am a monster."

Her heart twisted at that. "No you aren't."

"I am, dammit." Aggravation evident in every motion, he tugged the narrow pant legs past his muscular calves, still avoiding her gaze. "Which only partially explains my state the day we met."

Silently, Laney snatched Mr. Hammond's shirt and pulled it over her head.

"My grandfather had a renowned penchant for hunting big game. By the mid 1700s, he'd gone on *safari* in Africa so many times, it was a wonder he still called England home."

Nash located his stockings and slung them both over his shoulder. Too overwrought to slide them on properly?

Rather than interrupt him, as he'd just begun explaining how his grandfather had killed two lions while they were mating and had been attacked by a third, Laney listened and watched – and plotted her next move.

"He almost bled to death until a local witch doctor was summoned and healed him. But only after a ceremony in which the old codger was clueless," he added, abandoning the search for his shirt and drawing his waistcoat on directly over bare skin.

By now, Laney had commandeered his boots as well, stuffing her feet into each.

She watched as he haphazardly did up the buttons on his striped waistcoat, apparently not realizing how improper – or attractive – the exposed muscles in his arms looked or how invitingly his bare chest was showcased beneath the misaligned waistcoat. "Either insensible from loss of blood or uncaring because it was a different culture, my demmed grandfather was completely pitch-kettled by what was going on, had no idea he'd just traded our souls for his life. It wasn't until decades later that our family learned *Simba* spirit medicine was used to heal his body and in return, part of *our* bodies are controlled by it every year."

"Controlled by...lion spirit?"

"*Roho ya Simba*, yes." On his knees now, Mr. Hammond razed the pile that previously contained her neatly folded stockings, dress and shawl, scattering everything higgledy-piggledy due to his unchecked efforts. "That's how I finally resumed human form this morning. Though I'd begun to despair ever eating without fangs again, it finally occurred to call on lion spirit to return me to my prior shape, just as I'd called on it to change and save you."

Oh, she'd have to save this image of him – standing there in his bare feet, hopping from the damp spot her release and the wine had left earlier, muscles bulging from the exposed sections of his waistcoat, hair windblown from agitatedly running his hands through it...and still stoically explaining away, without ever once glancing in her direction. "Did you not say that you've never *changed* before?"

"I haven't – not voluntarily, that is. Today was the first, princess. Several firsts, in fact, and I...I... Where in the bloody hell are my boots?"

"Over here."

And then he finally looked at her. His eyebrows shot skyward. "You're wearing my boots?" He stepped forward. "My *shirt*?"

Still sitting on one side of the quilt, Laney shrugged. "I didn't want you running away."

"Who said anything about leaving?"

"You wouldn't look at me and you kept pulling on all your clothes. What else was I to think?"

"It's deuced difficult, telling you this. You could have me consigned to Bedlam or transported to New South Wales or—"

"Do you forget that I already knew?"

Mr. Hammond crouched beside her and picked up her hand, idly caressing the back. "That's the only reason I've been able to share this much."

"Then why'd you start dressing?"

He brought her hand to his lips. "Because I'm a clod. I make you remain nude and elucidate but I don't have the pluck to do the same."

"You're the bravest man I know," she told him truthfully, curving her fingers toward his a second too late—as he'd just stood. Distancing himself? "To learn that you sacrificed like that for me, succumbed to your...blessed curse to save me from Reginald...well, I'm honored by your efforts, truly honored. You've rescued me in so many ways and I—"

"Save your appreciation, Laney, for you may decide it should rightly be condemnation instead." He stalked all the way across the clearing and bent low, speaking over his shoulder. "For it was my brother's wife I attacked just hours before we met, which explains why I was in no mood for convivial conversation."

Attacked? "Hours?" she said in as neutral a voice as she could muster. Then, "His wife?"

"Might as well be." He stood, moved to his left in the grass and crouched again, keeping his back to her. What was he doing? "They're affianced, only Erasmus had kept the feline part of himself a secret and when the feral instincts to Change became too great, rather than take a wench to calm them or confess to Francine, he suffered. Suffered like I've never seen."

"I have." But the words were said too softly for him to hear. She spoke again, louder. "You suffered last eve, all through the night."

"Did I?" He discounted his own anguished hours as if they were nothing more than he deserved, standing, walking a few steps then kneeling again. "Only Erasmus' self-denial didn't just affect his body. We're connected during this time of year and my cells were altered to the point that no matter how much I..." At this, he shot her a glance, but he'd stopped too far away for Laney to read his expression. "Regardless of how often I...*you know*...I couldn't find any peace. When I arrived in London, Erasmus was behaving like an old soaker—totally disheveled. Hadn't donned new clothes in days,

from what I could tell. Completely opposite of his customary grooming. Even had me tie him to the bed to keep from going after her. A short while later, Francine appeared and I—I...”

Abruptly, he stood. A veritable bower of ragged, weedy flowers protruded from his clenched fists. Arms stiff at his sides, he turned and walked toward her. “Not to put too fine a point on it, let me simply say I behaved like a despicable brute.”

Irony, wasn’t it, that *now* was the first time Mr. Hammond exhibited any difficulty expressing himself? And it had to do with another female. One Laney wished she’d never heard of. “What does ‘you know’ and ‘taking a wench’ have to do with stifling your curse?” *And just exactly how did you attack Francine?*

“Sex, Laney,” he said bitterly, still evading her gaze. “Nightly sex is the only way we’ve found to stay human during Leo. Lion spirit. Lion sex. They both equal lion offspring. And the *Roho ya Simba* lives on.”

Heavens.

Laney concentrated on breathing, the usually ignored act suddenly taking on new significance as she consciously lifted her chest and drew air into her lungs then pushed it out. Again. And again.

Absorbing everything he’d said and inferring everything he hadn’t...

It was a moment before the absolute stillness reached her. The silence.

Not the kind where birds twitter in the background or leaves rustle. Not the kind where one expects a response or prays for forgiveness, but the kind of soundless finality when one knows the unpardonable has been done and nothing can ever make it right.

Laney heard the stark silence that followed his confession. She *felt* it, but more than that, she sensed his remorse and self-castigation. His desperate need for absolution. In one fluid motion she rose to her feet, reaching for him. “Mr. —”

“That’s not the worst of it, either,” he said swiftly, stepping away. “As if what I did to Francine isn’t enough, I caused another to lose her life.”

Laney’s hands shot out and she gripped his nearest wrist, refusing to allow his complete withdrawal, tolerate his attempted escape. He dropped the scraggly weeds and froze, not fighting to jerk away but neither responding to her touch.

“Another?” she questioned.

“Another woman and her in addition to Phineas. He’s gone too and I’m to blame.”

The breath she’d worked so hard to acquire whooshed from her lips. “And I thought I had secrets?” Tugging on his arm, she pulled him down until they both landed on the quilt. Cautiously, she encouraged, “Share the rest with me?”

He nodded once, but said nothing.

“Starting with Phineas,” she prodded. “Who is he?”

Extracting his wrist, Nash immediately set his fingers to industriously stripping leaves away from the lank stems. “Our cousin, he’s older than Erasmus by a year, older than me by four. As the eldest three boys of this generation of *cursed* Hammonds,” his

words became more bitter, “we’d all heard about The Change, of course. Whispered mutterings during family gatherings, more serious discussions when we neared our majority, but we all thought it nothing more than a lark, something told to adventuresome boys to keep them from straying too far.”

Laney tugged the long sleeves of his cuffs down and closed her fists around the fabric, hugging her middle, absorbing his presence that was imprinted on the linen because, ironically, though he’d sat just inches away, Nash Hammond now seemed farther from her than he ever had in the stagecoach.

“My brother inherited when he was eighteen, but even at that young age, he took his responsibilities seriously, acting as head of the family, looking out for everyone. I think Mama, and Papa before his death, had gotten through to Erasmus where he *did* believe, at least in part, but he was determined to *think* his way—our way—out of the curse. Whenever he broached it with me or Phin, wanting to discuss the deep, dark Family Secret, we laughed at him and accused him of being overly interested in spreading Banbury tales.”

“What about your cousin’s father? Did he not impress upon Phineas the truth?”

“Phineas inherited the curse from his mother. She was our eldest aunt, had married a country baron who convinced both her and Phin the curse was pure nonsense. By then Grandfather had passed on and our other uncles had either settled sedately in the northern shires with their own brides or traveled abroad. Every summer, Erasmus lives in fear that bastard Hammonds will appear and wreak havoc in high society London.”

The spindly weeds stripped as naked as his emotions—whenever he chanced to look at her—he started plaiting them together. “So Phineas was set to get married. It was an important alliance, joining two powerful families and all that. He’d been betrothed to her forever it seemed, loved her too, I gather, but the wedding was scheduled during the time of Leo the year Phin turned twenty-five. The *day* he turned twenty-five. Erasmus pleaded with him to cry off or to change the date at the very least, but Phineas wouldn’t have it. And me, baffle-headed me...”

His fingers mangled three of the stems. He tossed them aside and started afresh.

“What about you?” she queried softly, hugging herself harder when he remained silent so long she quite thought he’d changed his mind and decided not to finish his tale.

“Me? Hell, I deserve to be stuck in the pillory and pelted to death because over one too many bottles of brandy, I encouraged the insanity. ‘Marry her,’ I said, full of drunk ideology—Erasmus had just gifted both Phineas and myself with adjoining estates. Nothing grand, mind you, but he’d found two country abodes, manor houses really, for sale just a short ride from each other and bought them for us. Said he wanted to make sure his closest male relatives were provided for. Phin didn’t need it, was marrying into one of the richest families in England, was set to inherit himself once his father passed on, but that’s the kind of man my brother is. Always watching over others. Whether they warrant his care or not.”

Once the green stems were all plaited, his fingers and words paused. In the silence broken only by his harsh breathing, she watched him trace over the leggy stalks. Laney unwound one arm and touched the back of his wrist. "Did your cousin postpone his wedding?"

He flipped his hand and grasped hers, finally lifting his gaze. His expression anguished, he shook his head. "What should've been a celebration turned into a bloodbath. 'Marry her,' I'd laughingly encouraged. 'You'll have the fortune of priggging a virgin on your wedding night to commemorate the day of your birth and the curse will be avenged!' More fool I."

"Oh Mr. Hammond..."

"We had a great laugh over it, too full of ourselves to realize we weren't simply two young drunks comparing the virtues of a particular wench. We were trifling with people's *lives*." His fingers tightened, squeezing the blood from hers. "The day after the wedding, when by suppertime neither of them had emerged or taken in the food trays left by the maid, the bride's mother entered the bedchamber. She found chaos. Blood everywhere, her grown daughter incomprehensible and incoherent. Phineas was gone. Vanished as if he'd never been there. Except for all the blood – and the fur."

"His...wife?"

"Wouldn't speak, from what I gather. Parents hauled her off, back to London to consult with physicians. They were looking into dissolving the marriage when she...she killed herself."

"And your cousin?"

He released her numb fingers and turned to face her, more guilt than any man should ever bear drowning the depths of his eyes. "I don't know. Dead, most likely. We've not had word from him since the wedding. No one has." Warily, he wiped a hand down his face. "So you see why I cannot call my curse a blessing. No god would condone these tragedies. Regardless of how I might wish otherwise, I don't deserve to be exceedingly happy. I killed two people, attacked another and –"

"Stop it right now!" Laney rose to her knees and gripped his upper arms. "Cease your prattle!"

"My prattle? That's what you call my heartfelt confessions, madam?"

She dug in her fingernails and shook him with all her might. "When they're wrong, *yes*! I won't deny that goading Phineas into marriage was a mistake and what happened as a consequence is tragic, and I hurt for the pain you've heaped on yourself because of it, but you were barely more than a child yourself. At seventeen, even eighteen, I thought Reginald the most dashing, generous man in the world. Would you hold that against me?"

His arms tensed beneath her assault but he didn't move. "It was my fault. Despite the age difference, Phin and I were always close. If I'd attempted to dissuade him..."

He looked away. Laney seized his jaw in one hand and urged him to face her. After only token resistance, he swiveled his head, scowling. "What?"

"You said he loved her."

"He did."

"They *wanted* to marry. I sincerely doubt anything you or anyone said to the contrary would 'ave changed their minds."

Laney could tell she commanded his attention, but a single shrug of his shoulders was the only indication she was reaching him at all. It wasn't enough. She cupped both sides of his frowning face, ready to rip it off his neck if he didn't listen. "You must forgive yourself and release these demons you're 'olding on to. They're destroying you inside."

From the way he swayed toward her, searched her eyes with his, she knew he wanted to believe her, wanted to accept her understanding and forgiveness and make them his own, but then he jerked back, tried to escape her relentless hold. Laney wouldn't have it.

"And Francine?" he asked harshly. "How do I atone for that? I can't claim age as an excuse. Not that what I did is excusable. Ever."

She gentled her fingers before she bruised his cheeks and heaved a deep sigh. "Nash Whose-Middle-Name-Should-Be-Stubborn Hammond, you said that much of last night is a blur. Why is that?"

"The Change. It alters us. While we fight it—"

"Don't you see, you willful, stubborn man?" She pulled on his hair when he tried to look away, yanked him right back in place. Eyes narrowing, he stayed. "The same thing happened before with *that other woman*."

"Other woman?"

"*Francine*," she practically spat, insanely jealous of the unknown female solely because Nash *cared* about her.

"No I don't."

"Don't what? Believe me? Because—" And then his hands were bracketing *her* face, halting her tirade.

"I don't care about Francine. What gave you such a chuckleheaded notion?"

She'd said that out loud? Of all the things to tell him!

Laney remained silent and he slid one broad hand to her nape, curved the other around her back and brought her into intimate contact with his body. Ludicrous though their joint attire, all she could focus on was the intensity he directed at her. "Erasmus loves her to destruction—his own, if he's not careful, but she must be special to have tamed my duty-driven brother. Though I'm ashamed to admit it, I hated her for what she was doing to him and ultimately me. Through no fault of her own, my pain had increased so that by the time she finally appeared, I treated her abominably."

"But, Mr. Hammond. Nash...you held me last night—through your own suffering and I *do* remember. All of our time together, I remember. The grunts, the growls. When

you get *rough*." She held his gaze, even through that last part, never more proud of herself. She really wasn't hiding anymore. "And I confess I like it when you get rough."

"Do you now?"

She nodded against the pressure of his fingers. "Whenever you are altered by the lion spirit, I think your mind distorts things. I believe, when you return to London and face Erasmus and her, you'll find they don't condemn you even a fraction as much as you condemn yourself."

"And you'll go with me?"

"Me? Return to London?" Laney tried to put some distance between them. Her efforts were futile. "Heavens, no. I'm never going back. Reginald may say I'm free, but I'm not certain how legal it is to dissolve an indenture or what the proper process entails. For all I know his brother may start looking for me the moment I set foot in town and have me brought up on charges for running away or stealing or any manner of things the gent could claim if he took a mind – Mr. Hammond! *What are you doing?*"

He'd pushed her bum to the quilt, risen to his knees, and had his hands at her head. "Measuring your brainbox."

"Have you lost your mind?" Of a certainty, she had...sitting there, crumpled atop the crumpled quilt among a pile of exceedingly crumpled weeds while long, sinuous fingers created patterns over her head. Patterns that caused her entire noggin to purr with pleasure.

He only murmured, "Do believe I have enough."

"Enough of what?" she demanded, peeling his fingers off her scalp and holding tight. "Surely not wits, for I declare all of yours have gone begging!"

"Likely, they have." He leaned down and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "If I can be standing outside in nothing save my waistcoat and pantaloons, exposing my soul...with neither of us running for the nearest ship." A wobbly smile curved his lips and to her utter relief, he lowered himself and sat beside her. "Amazing, that."

"But we're in the middle of England!"

He picked up several hanks of plaited weeds and started weaving them together. "That we are and your faith has convinced me that no matter how great my guilt or how small our country, I'll never be easy with myself until making amends directly to Erasmus and Francine. Even over Phin's dedicated gravestone, if I must. And I want you to come –"

"But I can't go back!" Laney realized she sounded like a screaming shrew, one with no ladylike training at all. "Pardon me. I choose not to return." *Choose it with all my might.* "I don't want to ever cross paths with George John or his cohorts again. As he's a dedicated Londoner, I'd as soon steer clear."

"Life brings surprises every day. I never thought I'd meet a woman who looks better in my boots than I do."

Realizing how she must appear—seeing how he did!—and unwilling to argue, Laney smiled. She nodded toward his handiwork. “What’re you doing?”

“Paying homage.” After that cryptic remark, he wound the woven stems around and over several times and tied them off. Then he plopped the circlet on her head. “Every princess needs a crown, don’t you think?”

And while she was still absorbing the warm, tingly feelings his words—and her new hat—gave her, he caught her gaze, his most serious once again. “Erasmus will take care of it, you know.”

“Take care of what?”

“You. He’ll make sure you’re free from this older Tate, legally and any other way that concerns you.”

“And why would he bother himself to do that? What even makes you think he can?”

“He’ll do it because I’ll ask him to. And he can because he’s a marquis.”

Blighters.

Chapter Eleven

The White Knight Rides – and on his own Horse!
A fortnight later, still at The White Knight Inn

“Stop fidgeting! You’re worse than a little boy with leeches in his breeches.”

Nash slid his hand higher on her thigh, moving mounds of fancy skirts and lacy undergarments out of his way in the process.

“Mr. ‘ammond,” she squeaked, “I can guarantee you makin’ *me* fidget won’t ‘elp your cause at all!”

He loved the way she did that—became all flustered when he touched her. Forgot to be a lady. He found the slit in her drawers and eased his fingers inside but didn’t do more than touch her curls. Her humid heat was almost his undoing, but he clenched his opposite hand around the arm of the chair he’d been plastered to since agreeing. If he stopped distracting her, perhaps she’d stop torturing him.

Or so Laney had said on more than one occasion since he’d complied with her wishes earlier that morning.

After all, hadn’t he finally come around to her way of thinking? It had only taken a week of her daily admonitions, detailing what a bang-up fellow he was before both his mind and conscience had started to believe her. Now she had him pondering of all manner of things, such as apologies and family and making things right with his. It was time to stop running, time to release the guilt he’d harbored over his past mistakes so that he had room to concentrate on his present and future.

So here he sat, allowing Laney to cut his hair. Once he realized he no longer thought of himself as a beast, Nash knew he didn’t need to look like one either. Oh, but how she brought out his beastly instincts.

She wiggled around the chair, moving in front of him, her alluring scent knocking him in the face.

Bloody hell. Being still would only get him so far. He let his fingers probe higher.

“Nash!” Her arm flinched and the scissors snapped shut.

Pain seared his ear. “Damnation, woman!”

His fingers flexed in her cunny but didn’t retreat.

“An’ what did I tell you? ‘Ow am I supposed to trim your hair when you go an’ do a foolish thing like that?”

His middle finger dove deep. “Like what?”

“Touch me ‘ungry cunt, you ornery cat!”

"Aren't you finished by now? How long does it take to snip off a little hair and a lot of ear?"

"Oh!" Her foot stomped. The action only served to give his finger some delightful friction. Evidently, Laney agreed because she moaned a soft "Mmm."

"Finished torturing me?" Nash loosened his death grip from the chair and flexed his fingers—all of them.

The scissors hit the table with a clack. She tried to step away, but he whipped his free arm across the back of her thighs and held tight. Her legs squeezed around his wrist, trapping him. Oh damn, he thought with a smile, what a place to be trapped.

"You call what *I'm* doing torture? What about your fingers?"

"What about them?" Since she was now standing before him with nary a protest, he ran his free hand up and under her dress and searched along the crack of her arse. Finding what he sought, Nash smeared her cream from pussy to anus. "Just making sure you stay well oiled, princess."

She clutched his shoulders. "You make me sound like a rusty hinge."

"Not at all. Like a well-loved woman."

"And there you go again, spreading that word around." She groaned and thrust her arse back against his invading fingers. "Although that's not all you're spreading."

Love. He'd all but told her. All but... "Come to London with me."

"Now why would I want to go and do a clumpish thing such as that? When I'm exceedingly happy right here?"

And just as she always did when he mentioned it, she deferred, but this time he was staring right at her and finally figured out why. Though not as transparent as when she'd avoided him or blatantly changed the subject, the action was significantly more telling for all its subtleness. He stilled his caresses. "You just blinked and kept your eyes shut when you answered me!"

Those shielding lids flew open.

"You're still hiding!" He didn't mean for the words to come out as an accusation but they did. He sought to soften their blow, anchoring his fingers high in her quim and pulling her, shapely bum and all, as close as he could. Nash kissed her stomach through the fancy dress. "Granted, not under an ugly hat or behind a veil, but you're afraid to return to London with me. Afraid to face something, something more than the legalities of your indenture, I'm thinking. What, I wonder, could it be?"

She looked wounded, but at least she was gazing at him now. Those green eyes mirroring uncertainty, she blinked and opened her mouth to speak but remained silent. Closing it primly, she gave a delicate shrug.

Thinking hard, he allowed his hands to fall away from beneath her skirts but kept her securely in front of him by raising his arms to toy with the pins in her hair. "Would you say no if I suggested a trip to...Italy? Or Scotland?"

"Scotland? *Italy?* Together?"

"Of course together, you silly peagoose. How else would it be?"

Laney stepped from his slack hold and walked backward until she flopped on the bed, her skirts fluffing up around her legs. She began nervously fingering the ribbon on her dress, glancing at him through the fall of ebony hair he'd disheveled just moments earlier.

"Don't. Leave. Me," she said dispassionately. "Every time we're intimate, you say 'Don't leave'. But not once have you asked me to stay." She looked down where her fingers were mangling the pretty ribbon they'd picked out together on one of their walks into town. "Tell me true. Are you talking in your heart to Francine?"

Nash bolted from the chair and knelt before her, catching her gaze. "Francine? What on earth gave you that impression?"

"Are you telling me it's untrue?"

"Completely!"

"But the way you keep wanting to return to London. Did you not tell me at the beginning of our acquaintance that you cared nothing about your destination? That you only wanted to *escape* your past? Why're you now so determined to go back?"

Agitatedly, she slid that long length of blue satin through her fingers. Nash curved his palms over her thighs and leaned in. "Because I finally have a reason. Because I finally admitted to myself that I *do* care, about any number of things. You're at the very top of that list and other than knowing I owe her an apology, Francine barely rates the last rung."

A small smile curved her lips and she left off destroying the ribbon and brought her hands to his shoulders. "Truly?"

"Definitely. And I'm certain your hair-trimming skills warrant a return trip to Bailey's. I need to thank you properly for turning this shaggy beast into a civilized one."

"You're not a beast." Her fingers tickled his nape but Nash refused to flinch.

"Neither have I frequented a sweet shop in decades. Wouldn't you like to introduce me to your favorite one? Seriously though, part of me is compelled to return in time to make peace before my brother's wedding. And because of you I realize that no matter how uncomfortable the notion, I'd do better facing him and Francine rather than allowing things to fester to the point I don't feel I can ever go back. Now that I'm no longer running, I've learned a funny thing—guilt grows the longer it remains unaddressed."

Her fingers began caressing his shoulders, her eyes once again beaming with their customary sparkle. "You really aren't thinking about her when we're intimate?"

"Most assuredly not." Nash prayed that honesty shone from his own eyes. His throat had gone tight, making swallowing difficult despite the slight touch of her fingers stroking beneath his chin. "Not once, not since telling you of my shame have I thought of her. But I think about *you* every minute. Why else would I still be holed away in this inn instead of outside on the road?"

"So it's *me* you've been asking not to leave?"

"It is, though it's more than a little daunting to learn I've been expressing that sentiment out loud. Embarrassing actually, for— Wait." He gripped her fingers and swallowed again. "Have you just tied your blue sash around my neck?"

"I have."

"Now my embarrassment is complete." But for her smile, it was small price to pay. "No self-respecting man not of the dandy class would be caught wearing frills and furbelows, much less be caught dead wearing a bow around his neck."

"You're not dead, dearest." She freed one of her hands to arrange the loops of the bow.

"Ah, princess. If you've developed a penchant for tying things, I'm certain there's any number of body parts we can practice with that would be infinitely more—"

"Oh do hush. I'm making a statement here."

"And that would be?" Apparently satisfied with her handiwork, Laney rested her palms on his shoulders. His legs shifted, protesting the hard floor beneath his knees.

"Do you recall the day Reginald left? Do stop growling, Mr. Hammond."

As most of it had been for show, it was easy to comply. "Yes, princess," he said as contritely as he could manage—not horribly difficult with a satin ribbon bumping into his jaw. "Do go on."

"You had my indenture papers in the basket and—"

"I intended to give them to you but was distracted when we..." He raised and lowered his eyebrows pointedly. "Several times in fact."

"I know precisely what we did, you wretch. But you only had the papers because I *told* the innkeep to give them to you."

"You told him? You *wanted* me to have them?" Ah, so that was the conversation he'd overheard the tail end of. What a surprise indeed. For upon their return to the inn, Nash had placed the document squarely on the trunk he'd requisitioned from Tate's room and they hadn't spoken of it since.

"I did, as a symbol of giving myself over to your care. Now tell me what is around your neck."

"A frilly-arse bow."

"Whose?"

"Yours." He saw exactly where she heading, but chose to make it as difficult for her as she had for him. After all, she'd just subjected him to wearing blue *satin*. Although, it did feel rather...silky. Hmmm. All manner of possibilities began careening around in his brain. His body followed.

"And I believe that makes you..." Her feet snuck out from below her hem and hooked around his back.

"I'm...yours?" he stalled, allowing her legs to pull him forward.

"Again with more feeling."

Laughing, Nash slid up between her legs and pushed her down on the mattress. "Laney Buckley, you own my hope." He came down on top of her. "I might as well give you leave to own my heart."

"Aw, Mr. Hammond, I do believe you're every bit as gallant as Mr. Shakespeare." She started tugging on his shirt, trying to free it from his pantaloons.

Leaving the demmed bow around his neck for the time being, Nash shifted until he could grab a mound of skirts. Hauling them up her legs, he muttered, "Woman, you wear more petticoats and undergarments than—" He wasn't jolter headed enough to finish his original thought of *any woman I've undressed*. With a muttered cough, he finished, "Any blasted female needs."

"This last layer, the one you're having such difficulty navigating, are called *pantalettes*, I'll have you know," she said in her remarkably credible lady imitation, given how she was grappling to eliminate the barrier of his shirt and rubbing her heated crotch against his fumbling fingers. "Complete with handmade Flanders lace and imported from France. This is my absolute favorite pair."

His shirt untucked, her nails latched on to the skin of his back. Nash scooted her legs apart and freed his dick faster than he could say *black butter*.

"Well, this is *my* favorite part." To emphasize, he slid the tip of his cock straight through the slit and against her pussy, dragging it up and down, coating himself and his fingers with her thick honey. "And it's Nash. By God, I've got my cock at your cunny, the least you can do is call me by my name."

"Mr. Nash Hammond."

"*Nash*," he snarled, situating his booted feet more firmly under him so he didn't fall on his arse. Viscous fluid trickled freely between the swollen lips of her quim. Nash painted his shaft with her slick juices, groaning. "Ready, are we?"

"For you, *Nash*? Always." Her nails scraped beneath his unfastened pantaloons, digging into the flanks of his arse.

He lurched forward, but refused to allow his cock entrance. "'Tis torture, and not mercy: heaven is here..."

"Mmm, you're so eloquent, *dear Nash*, but I do believe I've already heard that one," she moaned, rocking her cunny against him.

"I'll commit new ones to memory on the morrow." Arm and legs trembling, he anchored his knees against the bed, his dick at her portal.

"Will you?" Laney threaded her fingers through his hair and pulled sharply. Her lower body undulated against his cock head. "That won't be necessary, I'll consent to accept repeats, *Nash*."

"Gracious of you," he said on a fast breath, quickly losing his.

"Did you notice how I said it three whole times without laughing?" she asked on a giggle, ruining the entire effect.

"I noticed," he said, smiling down at her, continuing to tease her quim—and himself—by prolonging the sweet, sweet torture. Anticipating the bliss of their joining.

Feet around his thighs, she squirmed toward the edge of the bed. Her nails dug deeper. "Why're you waiting?"

Nash shook with the effort to keep from spearing into her. The damn bow was strangling him. That or maybe l-o-v-e. "Thought I'd see if I could get you to draw blood again— Ow!"

Those nails of hers pierced his skin and Nash split her pussy, his self-control in shreds. His cock spread her woman's flesh, pushed past her body's token resistance and lodged to the hilt. She surged up to meet him, ground her nails in. "God, princess, you're perfect."

"I'll not allow *you* to claim perfection for you're not touching me 'ard enough, Mr. 'ammond!"

Perfect except for her fascination with his deuced last name. Her cunny rippled along his shaft, clamped down when he retreated only to plunge all the way back in. Staring at her flushed, precious face, Nash marveled at the peculiarities of life and lionhood and his lovely, unladylike Laney. If he'd searched every continent across the globe, he couldn't have found another female more suited to be his mate.

As if right on cue, she whipped her hands from his butt and slapped him through his pantaloons, a look of intense arousal narrowing her eyes. "Touch me bum, you rogue! You know I like it best when you don't 'old back!"

Grinning, he dove his hand past her damnable "French pantalettes", tearing a seam in his haste, and found her crack.

"Finally!" she cried, evidently not holding another ruined pair against him, favored or not.

Sliding his fingertips along the crevice, he nudged her anus with his middle finger. Her cunny gripped his cock and held tight, pulling him in and squeezing him harder even as his finger felt the puckered hole blink open.

Nash leaned forward and merged their lips. Laney immediately sucked his tongue inside and bit down once he was embedded in her mouth. Nash's heart smiled. His lips followed and he eased his thickest finger past the tight sphincter and into the hot cavern of her arse. Her spicy little rectum sucked him all the way inside and welcomed him home.

Laney groaned and clenched tight—on his tongue, his cock and his finger—until she was riding all three, the sultry, grasping passages of her body all taking him so deep, so far Nash sensed his control slipping, knew he was about to pound into her without a dram of restraint. More than that, knew that she craved it, *loved* it.

Loved him.

Knowing because she wrenched her mouth to the side and screamed it as she climaxed, coming strong and wet with muscle spasms caressing his cock and finger and murmurs of "Love you forever, Nash 'ammond!" stroking his eardrums.

Nash gripped her arse, wondered if he was about to lose a finger—he'd already lost his heart—and felt his cock rejoice at pure, undiluted acceptance.

Kissing her lips, her jaw, her neck, then biting all three, he stroked inside her cunt and felt her pussy quivering all around him. His cock responded, shooting jets of semen toward her womb as her body drank him down. Nash poured out all he had, for thoughts of retreating or escaping, thoughts of being undeserving, had all evaporated beneath the joy that was Laney.

Knowing he owned her heart—by her admission, by her *choice*—gave him leave to own her body as he never had another's. Gave him the freedom he'd been lacking.

The freedom to fulfill his future...facing forward. Whatever that future might hold.

The powerful orgasm wiped him dry. Constricted his ballocks, knotted his gut and his throat—oh wait. That was her bow.

God it felt great.

So did his cock. And his finger. And his near-to-bursting heart.

Sinking into the mattress with a sigh, Laney blinked up at him. "Good—you finally realized it."

Who could realize anything when their mind—and ballocks—had just blown sky high? "Realized what?"

"That I'm not going anywhere. For the first time, you didn't ask me not to leave."

"Oh. Well. Grand, that." Grandest orgasm on record, Nash was thinking. Then his ears backtracked. "What did you just say?"

"I'm not going anywhere, you beast, I promise you that."

Calm settled over him unlike any he'd ever experienced.

Her eyes flashed. "Especially not since knowing you father my children."

Despite the waning release and frilly bow, he managed to strangle out, "*Children?*"

Bravely facing the future was one thing; being decisively told what it held, quite another.

Laney nodded and tapped him on the nose, an incongruous action given how they were both still shaking. "Several, in fact."

Dismay descended heavily, squashing out his calm. Dismay and apprehension, followed by amazement. That and his newfound friend—hope.

Nash lowered his lips to hers. "Interesting, wouldn't you say, how that concept *doesn't* send me racing for the nearest exit?"

* * * * *

The following morning...

Nash knocked once then opened the door. It swung smoothly on its new upper hinge. "Your trunk is downstairs. Innkeep says the coach'll be by in a quarter hour."

"You were gone significantly longer than I expected, Mr. Hammond." Smiling archly, Laney glanced up from putting the final touches on her letter to Mary. "I won't have any trouble posting this before we leave as I've had time to write a veritable tome."

"Then it was all for the best that my, ahem, tasks weren't accomplished as quickly as I'd anticipated."

With a flourish worth any lady, Laney signed her name and waved the last sheet of parchment to dry it. "And what tasks might those be?"

"This for one." He held up a small parcel. "Since I know you've developed a fondness for it, I persuaded the cook to wrap up some of her honey cake and black butter to take on the road."

Laney did a poor job of muffling her squeal of delight. "Very worth waiting for indeed!" Pitching her voice lower, she drawled, "Though I wouldn't say I'm the only one who's developed a fondness for that particular treat."

"Mmm-hmm."

She turned the parchment over and wrote Mary's direction on the bottom flap, noticing out of the corner of her eye that he hadn't yet come into their room, was still leaning against the door frame, watching her actions and looking as devil-may-care handsome as ever, despite his efforts at polish.

"I do so like your new hat," she told him. Putting down her quill, she capped the ink then smiled at the picture he made. In lieu of putting a bullet through it, he'd let her remake one of Reginald's beavers—one without either bird or horse droppings. Nothing overtly ostentatious, it now sat at a rakish angle atop his head. "You're looking mighty dashing this morning, Mr. Hammond."

Closing the door, he finally came forward. "One of these days, princess, I'm going to cure you of that nasty mister habit you've developed."

Laney folded her letter and tilted the candle to seal it shut. "It's a sign of respect."

"It's a sign of distance, if you ask me. If I put my mind to it, I'm certain I could come up with something infinitely more suitable." He dropped a well-worn copy of *The Times* next to her sealed letter. "I found this for us to read on the trip. It's almost a week old, but fairly clean."

"Thoughtful of you, but at this moment I'm more interested in hearing what appellation you deem more appropriate than mister. My dearest? My handsome, energetic, feral lover? Oh! I have it—my *prince*?"

"Tut, tut." He reached her side and ran his hand over her carefully arranged hair. A new style that had taken her most of the morning to perfect. Now that she had someone

to show off for, someone who really cared about her and not just her outward trappings, Laney found herself surprisingly particular about her appearance. His fingers tightened and he tilted her head. "In lieu of mister or prince, let's try *king*, shall we? It's more stately."

Pursing her lips at his high-handed tone, she eased her head from his grasp and blew the candle out on a gurggle of laughter. "My king? That'll be the – Oh heavens."

When her words ground to a halt, the teasing glint in his expression hardened. "What is it?"

"Nothing but a brief memory," she said evasively, standing and smoothing her dress. "All is well."

His features eased, but he nodded commandingly. "Then try it."

Sputtering on a laugh, Laney barely complied. "My k-king."

"Very well done of you. Now tell me what you remembered." He reached down to retrieve her traveling valise and his bag, one dark eyebrow raised in inquiry.

She caved. It was always more fun when she taunted him with her visions, gave him just enough to keep him wondering. Not that she'd had any more, she hadn't, which Laney considered fortunate indeed. It meant the direction of her life was right on course for those afternoon lovemaking sessions she'd glimpsed in the gazebo. "A reminder of the first vision I saw of us."

He stopped moving. "Do share, princess."

Gathering the letter and newspaper from the table, she allowed a secretive smile to flirt with her lips. "Let's just say you'll eventually be getting your wish minus my mirth, my majestic, stately king," she added, rolling her eyes. The action caused her gaze to snag on the paper. She raised the corner and scanned one particular section. "Um, have you read this?"

"Not yet. Why?"

"I thought you said the wedding wasn't until November."

"What wed – *My brother's*?"

Nodding, she avidly studied a certain heading. "Mmmm. Erasmus and Francine's."

"It isn't."

"I beg to differ." Laney emptied her hands and scrambled to open the paper over the table. "Look! Right here it says –"

"Well, I'll be damned." Nash skimmed the announcement, muttering out loud. "'The brooding Marquis of Blakely Erasmus Hammond, founder of an infamous assemblage we shall refrain from naming in the interest of not offending moral readers' so on and so forth...wed the mysteriously talented Lady Francine Montfort. One must assume her talent is of extraordinary measures to capture the heart and ring of the equally mysterious Blakely. The ceremony was held yesterday morning...'" His fingers tightened on the page and he looked up. "This doesn't change anything. I still need to go back. Still want to."

"I know."

"And I want you to come with— *Bloody hell!* Did you see *this?*"

Nash pointed to an article at the bottom of the page, one highlighted by a cartoon sketch of a large, shaggy cat. A cat with an exaggerated target drawn on its side.

The caption beneath read *Lincolnshire's Very Own Lion?* "'Residents of rural Lincolnshire terrorized by the thought of having an escaped circus animal in their midst. Or is it simply a wildcat whose exploits have been exaggerated? *Panthera leo* or *Felis sylvestris*, local hunters gather the first weekend of September in Horncastle to run the animal to ground.'"

The paper crumpled in his grip. "The devil they say!"

"Phineas?" she breathed.

"The properties Erasmus bought us aren't far from there." Nash dropped the paper and gripped her arms. "Do you know what this means? He may still be alive!"

"Have you not already checked there?"

"Erasmus hired a caretaker once Phineas went missing, stationed the couple on the grounds, just in case. We've never had word."

"But the organized hunt. What if they shoot—"

"They *can't*. Won't," he said, closing his eyes against the possibility. "I cannot imagine he would have survived this many years only to perish now."

"Wait. What town did you say?"

"Horncastle."

Laney loosed herself from his grasp to retrieve the folded parchment. She held up the letter she was about to post, and he read the direction. "Mary Delilah Middleton, Bedford Estate, North of Ho—" Eyebrows raised, he broke off. "Your friend Mary lives near *Horncastle?*"

"Not far from! Moved there several months ago when she was hired away from the school as a governess and— Oh my!" Laney rummaged through her reticule and pulled out the last letter she'd received from her friend. Tattered from being stuffed in her bag, Laney nevertheless ran her thumb over the familiar writing and easily found what she sought. "Listen— 'And dearest Laney, you will never believe the story I share next. It appears the nearby woods are haunted! But not by a traditional ghost, nothing so droll. No, you see, the Lincolnshire Wolds are inhabited by a phantom feline. One that appears then vanishes! I would love to confess 'tis nothing more than a prank, but, dearest, I cannot. For I have seen him!'"

Nash was pacing and mumbling. Fast, furious steps that clomped through the room counterbalanced by the slow, clear utterance of any number of things. Laney did her best to follow. "London. Stage. Marriage. Phineas. Bloody Lincolnshire. Wring his bloody neck, I will, for being alive all this time and not telling me!"

Across the room he paced, his boots clunking on the wooden floor as if so much nervous energy had built in his feet they were ready to take off. "Horses. Stage. Princess. *Phineas*."

Nash stopped and spun to face her. "Do you ride?"

He'd never thought to ask before as they both thrived on long country walks, and when they weren't snuggled securely in their room—in bed—they were outside, finding other meadows to *explore*. Before she even opened her mouth, Nash could tell by the crestfallen look on her face that she couldn't.

"I'm afraid not. The opportunity to mount a horse never occurred."

He snapped his fingers. "Right. Tate hated the beasts. Then it cannot be separate horses. Damn." At her gasp, he rushed to assure her, "No matter. I should have enough blunt to buy a pair and a curricule."

Laney rushed forward. "What are you thinking?"

He stared down at her, his hands automatically finding home on her precious waist. "London's out. The best wedding present in the world I can give Erasmus would be to locate our cousin. I'm for Lincolnshire—with your company, if you're agreeable. Might I assume you are?"

"But why *buy* horses? Isn't there a stage—"

"No time. The next one that direction isn't for two days. I saw the schedule downstairs. We can't wait that long. The hunt is set to begin by then." His fingers flexed above her hips, causing her skirts to sway along his legs. "I've been thinking it was high time I started my stables. From what I hear, I already have more than a fair start on my nursery."

She dimpled and he picked her up and swung her around. "No time like today! What do you say, princess? Do you not think it's time I took you home?"

Laney gripped his shoulders and her cry of delight filled the room. "*Home?*"

"To my manor." His grin spread wide and he lowered her feet to the floor. "Sounds rather grand when I put it that way, doesn't it? *My manor*. It's only a few hundred acres, mind you, grows barley and sugar beets from what Erasmus told me."

"You don't know?" Incredulity lit her eyes.

His face reddened beneath his hat. "Never had reason to. I haven't seen it."

"Oh, you wretched man! You own several hundred acres you never cared enough to visit?"

"I care now. Thanks to you."

"*All ready!*" The call came from the open window.

Nash walked over and poked his head out. "Unload the trunk, would you, my good man? The missus and I won't be going that direction, after all."

Nash straightened and faced her, crossing his arms in front of his chest and waiting. It took but a moment.

"Missus? Mrs.?"

Nash unhooked his arms and pulled a note from his pocket. He made a great show of casually tossing it on the floor, just in front of her slippered feet. "Here. I believe you dropped this one."

"Well, if that isn't an absolute clanker!" She bent to pick it up, shooting him a suspicious glance before turning her attention to the note. "What're you about...? Oh my." The loudest squeak he'd heard yet made its way past her lips. Followed by another. "I... I..."

"Seem to be having difficulty expressing yourself, princess." Her eyes were eagerly scanning the card while he waited, heart in his throat. "I confess, I do love you, you know, it's simply that I'm not used —"

"Mr. Hammond!" And then she jumped into his arms — almost knocking them both out the window — the remainder of his words swallowed by her kisses. The piece of parchment was left face up on the table but only until Laney packed it safely away in her reticule, directly before boarding their new curricule two hours later.

"Did you notice? It's Nash," he confessed after a number of very thorough kisses.

Lips wet and shining, Laney cocked an eyebrow. "What's Nash?"

"My middle name. Augustus is my given. Henry my third."

Her eyes lit up at that. "Augustus Nash Henry Hammond. Very stately indeed. My father was Peter. Peter Philip Buckley. What say we name our first son after both of you? Augustus Peter."

Nash nearly choked. "What say we don't."

"But —"

"Philip Nash. And that's the best you'll get from me."

"Philip Nash," she repeated softly. "That's a wonderful name."

"He'll be cursed. You realize that, do you not?"

"No. He'll be *blessed*. We'll see to it."

And so they did.

Laney, my Lady,

Blessed am I by Your Love.

I grant You mine in Return.

Will you Consent to be my Wife and bear my ~~Cubs~~ Children?

Infinites of Love,

Augustus Nash 'enry 'ammond

Author's Note

Indentures were common in 19th-century England, as were orphans. By some estimates almost ten percent of children had lost both parents by the time they turned fifteen; over thirty percent had lost one. Average life expectancy barely reached the upper-twenties for the rural working class. It was even lower in large cities.

The typical term for an indenture, also known as an apprenticeship, was seven years. Those in the middle class often chose to become indentured in order to learn a specific trade—milliners, cooks and even soap makers were among the occupations stipulated by a 16th-century law that required one to study as an apprentice before practicing independently. For the poor, especially a poor child or orphan, things were much bleaker. A child could be apprenticed at age nine for twelve years, only gaining freedom once reaching twenty-one. The person who owned the indenture was considered the “master” and they were legally allowed to beat their apprentice.

Laney was fortunate in that hers was the more palatable seven-year indenture and while she developed a distaste first for hat making and then for Reginald, she was well fed and cared for. I did take some liberties when it came to Mrs. Michaels transferring Laney's indenture to Reginald as my research failed to yield information of that sort, but given the economy of the time and the tardiness with which the upper class often paid their bills—a year's wait for shopkeepers wasn't unusual—I cannot imagine Mrs. Michaels not jumping at the chance to transfer Laney's indenture for the right price.

Black butter, which we witnessed Nash developing a fondness for, was the Regency equivalent of what we call apple butter today.

I also had some fun with the article and announcement posted in *The Times*. When this story takes place, the weekday editions of the paper were only four pages in length, marriage announcements were blunt and to the point—boring—and the only drawing or cartoon to be found anywhere was at the masthead—ironically, a lion! Well, to be precise, the masthead featured a full-maned lion on one side and some bearded, billy goat-unicorn-looking thing on the other.

>^..^< Larissa

About the Author

Larissa Lyons loves cats, chocolate, and her husband—though not necessarily in that order! She's been a clown, a tax analyst, and a pig castrator >^..^<, but none of those endeavors satisfy quite like putting pen to paper and seeing her stories come to life. To learn about Larissa's quest to have brownies declared an official food group or her penchant for Roaring Rogues, visit her website.

Larissa 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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