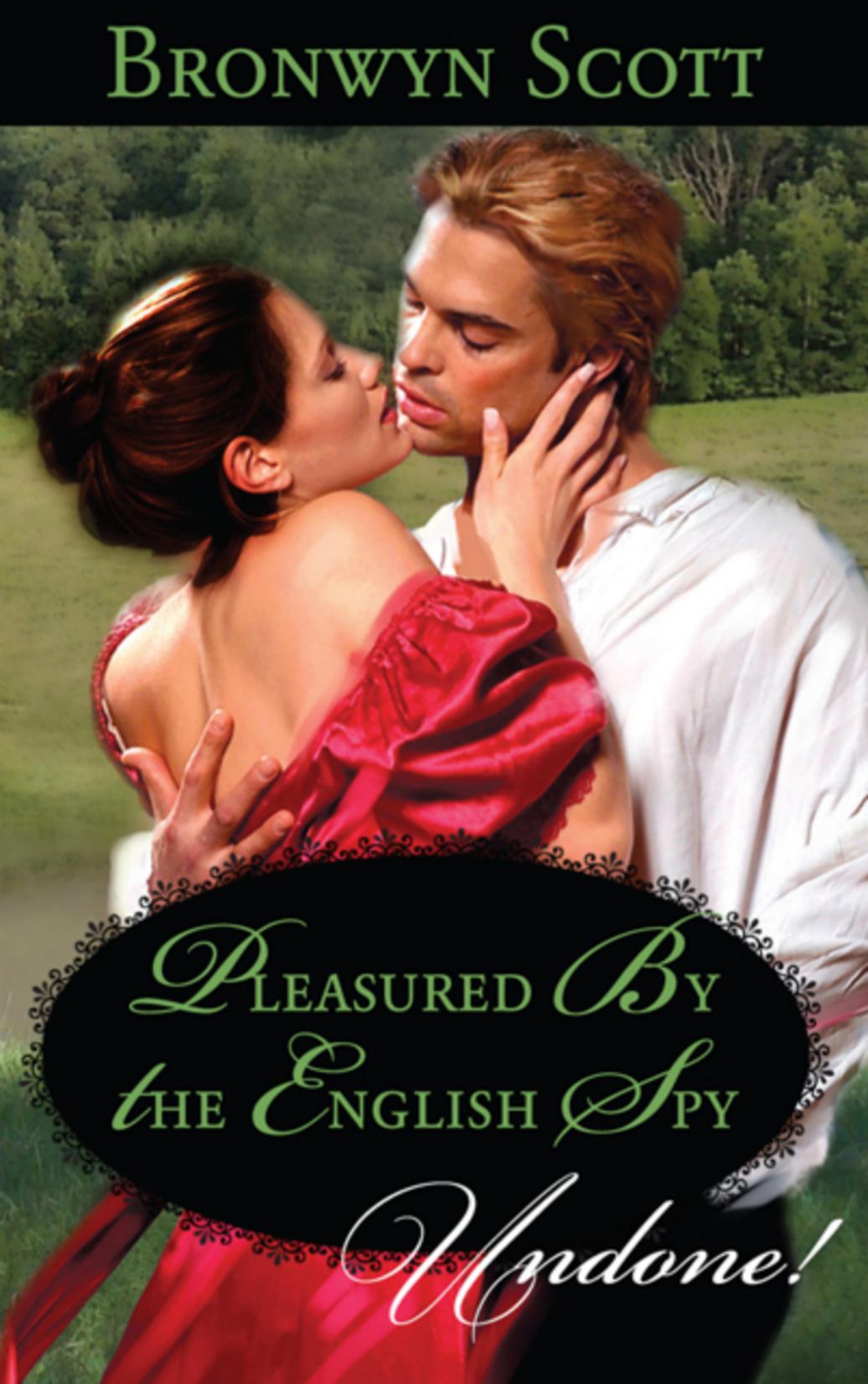


BRONWYN SCOTT

A romantic scene between a man and a woman in a field. The woman, with her hair in a bun, is wearing a red, off-the-shoulder dress and is kissing the man on the cheek. The man, with light brown hair, is wearing a white shirt and has his eyes closed. They are standing in a grassy field with a line of trees in the background.

PLEASURED BY
THE ENGLISH SPY

Undone!

Pleased by the English Spy

Bronwyn Scott



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Author Note

I cannot think of a lovelier place to be than Florence, Italy, in the fall. The days are comfortably cool and the new wine is almost ready. I've been wanting to do a story set in and around Florence for some time now. I had the good fortune to live in Florence on a teaching assignment a few years ago and I fell in love with it. So I jumped at the chance to put Andrew Truesdale there on his adventure.

Andrew Truesdale is a friend of Valerian Inglemoore, the Viscount St. Just from *The Viscount Claims His Bride* (January 2009 Harlequin Historical) during Valerian's years abroad. The Viscount's circle of friends during this time include Julian Burke, in the November 2008 Undone short eBook *Libertine Lord, Pickpocket Miss*, Andrew Truesdale, who gets his own story here in *Pleased By the English Spy*, Camden Mathison and Valerian's lovely cousin Emma, both of whom hope for their own adventures in the future.

The Undone short stories have been a fun way to explore some of the experiences Valerian refers to in *The Viscount Claims His Bride* when he returns home after nine years abroad. Now, when Val is talking about how he sent a Chusan palm home from Italy, you know exactly what he and his friends were doing

when that occurred! You can say, “ah, that must have been when...”

For fun facts about Florence and other settings used in my Undone short stories, come visit my blog at www.bronwynswriting.blogspot.com

Ciao!

Chapter I

October 1823, Florence Italy

Ah. He could breathe again. Andrew Truesdale steadied the gray-flecked stallion beneath him and sucked in a lungful of country air. Below him lay the red-roofed duomo that majestically marked the landscape of Florence. Beyond it, to the west, lay the dome of the Medici Chapel in the San Lorenzo neighborhood. From the hills above, the city looked peaceful, even stately and organized, each neighborhood marked with churches and towers.

Up here, one was hard-pressed to believe in the chaos below. Hidden from view were twisting streets hardly big enough for the service wagons that traveled through them and the narrow pavements that lined them. Certainly there were things he loved about Florence. The tight spaces were not among that number.

He preferred the wide openness of the countryside, any countryside. It didn't have to be the English countryside. It was the rhythm of the land he loved. He could see it in the change of the seasons, in the rituals of the harvest. In many ways, he believed October was the best time to be in Italy; the grapes were ready to pick for the new wines, olives hung plump with juice on their branches waiting to be plucked. There would be long days of hard work ahead for those who harvested the land, followed by nights of laughter and feasting as they celebrated the bounty saved in their storehouses, security against the coming year. If life was busy during the harvest it was simple too, with everyone focused on the singular goal of bringing in the crops.

He knew the pattern of this season intimately. He'd been here before, lived here as a boy with his grandparents. It was why he'd been the one chosen to come, the one the British delegation in Vienna had trusted with this mission.

Andrew turned his horse onto the upward path that led to his destination: the Villa of the Breezes, home to the woman whom the British believed held the key to the latest wave of liberal nationalism to gain momentum in the wake of Napoleon's ruined empire.

He gave the sure-footed stallion full rein to find a way over the hilly path, while he turned his thoughts to the details of his commission. Like most of the diplomatic work he'd been involved with in Vienna, this latest assignment was both straightforward and

complicated. A few months earlier another attaché, the Viscount St. Just, had written from Florence, where he'd stopped en route to his destination in Naples. St. Just had sensed something was afoot in the salons of Florence, but hadn't had the time to investigate further. The corps of diplomats in Vienna, headed by the viscount's uncle, had decided to send a delegate to Florence.

Andrew was to befriend the widowed contessa who'd come to St. Just's notice. He was to discover what went on at her salons, what politicians frequented her gatherings. She wouldn't be the first to attempt to sponsor a nationalist revolution under the cover of a harmless intellectual gathering. If St. Just's suspicions were borne out, things would get thorny. The complications were in the consequences of Andrew's findings.

Britain's position on liberal nationalism was tenuous. Theoretically, Britain supported the desire of territories to bind together into larger nation-states. Under Napoleon's regime, Italy, a region populated by city-states and principalities, had been converted into the Kingdom of Italy. After Napoleon's defeat, the country was swamped with a sense of national unity that competed with the Conference of Vienna's decision to disband the Kingdom of Italy and return the lands to their original status. Lands had been restored, but the wave of nationalism had not subsided.

That put Britain in an awkward position. Britain had supported similar movements in Portugal and

Spain but could not openly do the same for Italy. Supporting a unified Italy meant alienating the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which controlled large amounts of land in northern Italy. They would have to be defeated in war in order for Italy to claim those lands. But Britain could not openly fight the Austro-Hungarians. Britain needed their alliance. Without that alliance, Britain risked trouble in regards to the Eastern Question and water rights in Turkey which secured the British passage to India.

It was enough to make any man's head swim. But that was the diplomatic game these days in the new Europe and Andrew had a very astute mind for it. Any one move anywhere would impact alliances everywhere.

Andrew rounded a final corner, and the long gravel drive to the villa presented itself, lined with tall poplar trees on either side. He had a fair understanding of what he'd see at the far end; a villa designed to be an aristocratic refuge with long windows rounded on the top, columns and terraces to catch the cooling breezes against the summer heat, all of this surrounded by expanses of parkland. After all, this was the home of a widowed contessa who kept a small palazzo in Florence but retreated during the summer months to escape the heat.

Andrew had his own mental picture of the contessa, too: a woman of middle years with a fading beauty, whose sharp wit and political ties made her more attractive to the company she kept than her looks. He

knew how to charm that kind of woman. Vienna was full of them. Such flirtations had become *de rigueur*, his stock in trade as it were. The British delegation must have expected as much when they'd made their selection. Along with his background and fluency in Italian, Andrew Truesdale was a consummate seducer.

With these preconceived notions in mind, Andrew had been a bit surprised to find that the *contessa* in question was still residing in the hills when he'd arrived in town. A socialite didn't obey the call of the seasons like a farmer. He'd have thought she would have returned to town and her intellectual milieu at the first sign of cooler weather. But her small palazzo in town was still closed up. The servant stationed there had directed him to the summer villa.

That bit of surprise was nothing compared to the surprise he experienced now. The villa at the end of the drive was majestic enough with its columned main building and the single-story wings that flanked it, but there was no mistaking this for a socialite's retreat. This was a working villa like his grandparents' home.

Andrew dismounted and led his horse toward what looked to be a stable-block. A lone groom was on duty, polishing tack.

"Where is everyone?" Andrew asked in flawless Italian, although there was no disguising the accent that lurked underneath his perfect words.

The groom gestured vaguely past the house. "They're picking the grapes."

Andrew took that as an invitation to join whomever he found there. He strode forward, rounding the corner of the house. Nature brought him to a full stop. The lands of this house weren't given to pretty-but-useless expanses of green lawn. They were given to the growing of crops. Groves with their straight rows of olive trees, vineyards with their terraces of vines laden with grapes rose on the gentle slopes. There were weathered buildings too, probably an olive mill of sorts, Andrew guessed, and a workspace for wine making. The hillside was full of people picking grapes; snatches of song floated to him.

He had not expected this. Andrew made his way towards the people, asking the closest one where the contessa was. He was half expecting to hear that she was back at the house. The first person he asked gestured for another to join them. The newcomer was a tall, well-formed young man in his early twenties, a few years younger than Andrew. He shook Andrew's hand in the English custom and steered him away from the bustling vineyard, wiping sweat from his brow with a handkerchief.

"You're looking for Olivia, then?" the man asked in decent English.

Ah, the contessa had a name. Olivia. A rather ironic name given the surroundings. Fortunately, the young man was affable and didn't ask him to state his business.

“She’s in the shed.” His guide nodded towards one of the weathered buildings Andrew had noticed earlier. “Is she expecting you?”

“Not particularly. I was unable to send a precise date of my arrival.” Andrew said vaguely. The young man nodded with careless acceptance of his answer. Andrew was silently grateful there hadn’t been any further questions about his business.

Happy voices shouting in tones of amusement filtered out of the shed through the half-opened door. Andrew pushed the door open wider. His eyes adjusted to the dim interior and he smiled at the once-familiar scene. Women crushing grapes in the giant vat, skirts kilted up high, ready for the ancient Tuscan dance. He hadn’t seen anything like it since he’d left his grandparents.

Glad memories swamped him, and he was content to stand there for the moment, letting the sweet smell of grapes wash over him in a pungent wave, remembering the thrill of the grape harvest, watching the women work. One woman in particular garnered his attention. In the center of the enormous vat was a goddess of nature come to life; black hair, held loosely by a ribbon, spilled in waves down her back. Her legs were long and shapely, tanned where her skirts were drawn up. Watching those legs work to squash the grapes conjured up a hundred hot fantasies. But it was her face that captivated Andrew the most.

Although much of her face was hidden from view in the dimness of the shed, Andrew could see the

woman's smile; warm and lovely, this smile came from the core of her. There was no mistaking that she was lit up with joy from the inside out. Such unadulterated happiness was a rare commodity in his hard-bitten world, where everything was just another move on a chessboard and agendas as well as emotions were meant to be veiled.

The primal man in him surged unexpectedly to the fore. He wanted her with a clarity that precluded all else. He wanted this woman with the honest smile for his own. Never before had Andrew felt such a raw, instantaneous attraction. This was entirely new to him. The force of his desire to claim her was shockingly strong. He was used to playing the tiger, stalking his prey, studying it before he ran it to ground.

“Livvy!” His guide called out beside him. “There’s someone here to see you.”

Confusion paralyzed Andrew’s thoughts for a moment. The contessa was crushing grapes? No one in the big vat had looked old enough to be the contessa of his imaginings. Then his earth goddess nimbly climbed out of the vat and came towards them. *She* was the contessa? His goddess was the contessa? In no way did she resemble the aging woman he’d pictured in his head, and his body thrummed with the knowledge of it.

Chapter II

Up close, her face was as lovely as the shadows had promised. Almond-shaped eyes tilted slightly upwards at their tips. The soft curve of cheek and jaw gave her face a classic feminine look. This was a face that drove men to protect, to claim. This was a face men would want to come home to. It conjured up visions of uncomplicated pleasures: a simple meal at a rough-hewn table, a rope-strung mattress and a well-worn quilt. Dressed as she was in the cotton skirt and blouse of a peasant, it was not hard to imagine claiming her on that rope bed. The neck of her loose blouse had come open, offering a tantalizing peek of her breasts beneath the fabric. It was proving difficult indeed to reconcile this peasant princess with the contessa he was seeking.

She was all smiles when she spoke. “Who have you found now, Piero?”

Her Italian was easy, natural; to many, it would sound like a native tongue but Andrew heard the difference because it was the same difference he possessed. The Italian widow described in St. Just’s letter was no more Italian than he was. The contessa was English. Had St. Just known?

“It’s the other way around this time, Livvy. He’s found us. He’s looking for you.” Piero said. Only then did Andrew realize he’d failed to give his name.

Andrew stepped forward. “I’m Andrew Truesdale. Are you Contessa di Montebaldi? I’m a friend of Viscount St. Just,” Andrew explained as blandly as he could. He was already reaching inside his coat for his papers and the letter of introduction St. Just had written.

Her smile disappeared, and she speared him with sharp brown eyes the color of earth and agates. “I’m the contessa, and you can put those papers away. If you’re St. Just’s friend I know everything I need to know. I know you’re dangerous.”

Olivia held the stranger’s gaze for a long moment, as if in that span of time she could take his entire measure. Here was another handsome Englishman. He was the second in five months. She’d told Piero this would happen. She’d begged Piero after St. Just’s departure to be more careful. She’d told him he could not bring his “business,” such as it was, to her home any longer. He’d been more circumspect the last few months, but apparently her warning had come too late.

This man was older than St. Just. That had been a mistake she wouldn’t make again. She’d seen St. Just’s youthfulness. The viscount couldn’t have been more than twenty-three, and she’d assumed he hadn’t had

the sharp skill to divine what was going on around him. This man was closer to thirty.

This newcomer, this Andrew Truesdale, wore his intelligence in his eyes. He was making no effort to conceal the sharp mind that lay behind those forget-me-not-blue English eyes of his. There was something else in those eyes too, when he looked at her: unambiguous desire. He wanted her. That made him doubly dangerous. She could imagine wanting him too if things were different. He was handsome and golden with his thick hair and tanned face. He carried with him none of the brooding darkness that had accompanied St. Just.

“We’re very busy just now,” she said, wiping her hands on her skirt. “The grapes need to be picked and processed for wine and after that the olives will be ready. Olives have to be milled and pressed within twenty-four hours of harvesting, so it will be a demanding time.” She thought she was successfully fobbing him off, but his eyes told a different story. Was he laughing at her?

“I’ll stay. I don’t mind a hard day’s work. I helped out with countless harvests at my grandparents’ during my youth. They owned a farm near Fiesole.”

“That would be great,” Piero enthused, clearly eager to have some new male company. “We can use an extra pair of hands. I’ll show you up to the house and you can get settled.”

Olivia shot Piero a withering look. Her cousin-by-marriage was aiding the enemy without permission,

allowing him to turn her dismissal into an invitation. Now there was nothing she could say to his genuine offer without looking exceedingly suspicious. That was hardly what she wanted. Further protest would only serve to confirm St. Just's original concerns. Now, instead of sending the newcomer off to a *pensione* to cool his heels, she'd have him underfoot day and night. Tempting her as he was already with those smiling eyes.

She tried to dissuade him anyway. "There's a lovely inn right inside the town walls. It's not a long ride from here. Wouldn't you be more comfortable there? We cannot offer you the level of hospitality we could offer at another time of the year." If there was an ounce of the gentleman in him, he would understand this was a request to leave. Any well-brought-up Englishman would know this. Had they changed so much in the ten years she'd been away?

His eyes caught hers, silently acknowledging that he received her hidden message, but the slow smile that teased his fine mouth suggested he would not be denied so easily. "I assure you, I will be perfectly comfortable in the bed you offer." It was said gallantly, but the oblique reference to beds sent a frisson down her spine. She blushed.

"Did I say it incorrectly?" He feigned innocence, cleverly blaming his comment on a lack of skill with the language.

"I understood precisely what you meant," she retorted archly. She didn't believe his ploy in the least.

He had proven hard to defeat, and he would find her just as difficult. She would not be easily persuaded by his charms, bountiful as they were. But perhaps she could use that to her advantage.

Olivia watched the two men walk towards the house, her whirling mind deliberately slowing so that she could determine what needed to be done and why. The Englishman had come to see if there was substance behind the rumors of revolution and to quash them. It was the quashing part that worried her most. She wasn't sure what that would entail: a stern message from the British calling for the would-be revolutionaries to desist, or something more? Imprisonment? A few exemplary deaths? Betrayal to the hodgepodge of city-state governments?

She had to protect Piero. He was her late husband's cousin and he'd been her strong right hand in the three years since her husband's death. Regardless of how she felt about his politics, he had stood her friend without question, without a secret agenda, which was more than she could say for the tawny-haired Englishman. He was not here to make friends. *But perhaps he could be compelled to take a lover*, a tiny voice in her head suggested.

Olivia studied the broad-shouldered visitor walking into the distance, taller even than Piero, the sun burnishing his thick hair to a shade of antique gold. Handsome and strong, he was a confident man who would not find it difficult to believe a woman desired him.

Olivia turned back to the shed and the vat of awaiting grapes. She had her plan now. It was simple. He'd already indicated an interest of a sensual nature, given her the tool she needed to bait the trap. She would seduce his secrets out of him, determine how dire the quashing measures were permitted to be and proceed from there.

She would be in charge of how far the *faux affaire* went. She had no intention of sleeping with the Englishman. She did not take lovers on a whim. But she saw that much could be gained from a dalliance with him—and in short order. Acts of physical closeness heightened the sense of intimacy, whether it truly existed or not. It opened the way for the exchange of confidences—and quickly. Within the week, wagons loaded with olives for the mill would start to arrive, and with them, one wagon would hold the next step to Piero's dreams of an united Italy.

She must act immediately. She would start tonight at dinner. There was no time to waste in a traditional flirtation drawn out over weeks or months.

Around him in the vineyard, activity came to a standstill in the purpling dusk. Andrew looked up from the vines where he was working and saw the reason for it. A long line of torches paraded from the house, bringing with them the smells of dinner. The workers let out appreciative cheers and hurried to ready the makeshift trestle tables in a nearby clearing.

Andrew helped lift wide planks of wood onto the trestles. The parade of women entered the bustling clearing loaded with baskets and trays. Men rushed to take the torches and lanterns, placing them around the area. Andrew knew the light would be used for dinner and later for picking grapes into the cool of the night.

Long cloths fluttered and settled on the wood planks, transforming them instantly into real tables. At one end of a table, he caught sight of Olivia laughing. Her smile was back. There was no trace of the chilly welcome she'd given him. Her hips swayed gently, unintentionally, as she laid out plates for the meal.

There was no time like the present to further his acquaintance with the contessa. Andrew found his way to her side and lifted the basket of dishes from her arm. "Let me help you," he said, not waiting for a response. But she offered none. She let him take the basket without protest.

"What do you think of our little vineyard?" She laughed up at him, taking a plate from the basket.

"I'd hardly call it little, although vineyards always seem bigger when you have to pick them."

"I estimate we'll be done tomorrow. Then it will be time to move on to the olives."

A woman deposited a pitcher of wine on the table, accidentally jostling Olivia in the process. The contessa swayed towards him, off balance.

Andrew steadied her, appreciating the soft curve of her breast against him where their bodies collided. His body stirred at the scent of her. She smelled of the

kitchen and the winery: yeast and bread, grapes and fruit. To him, she smelled of home, the smells he'd hungered for when he'd been sent back to England at fifteen. She gave a small smile that was neither coy nor shy, acknowledging the brief but intimate contact between them.

"Will you sit with me for dinner?" Andrew asked in low tones, his voice surprisingly hoarse.

Dinner at the long tables was a loud, boisterous affair full of good humor and jokes. Wine flowed from never-empty earthenware pitchers, twilight deepened; the torches glowed more intensely against the darkness. People began to drift back to the vineyards, stomachs full, ready to work a few more hours. Snatches of country songs sprang up deep within the rows, calling those at the tables to join their fellows at work.

Andrew rose, reluctant to leave the woman at his side. Their table was nearly empty now. He would not have anyone say he'd played the idler. But Olivia stayed him with a gentle hand on his arm. "They will not miss you. Piero says you worked hard today and you are, after all, a guest." She held out her hand to him and issued a soft, promising invitation. "Come walk with me."

Chapter III

She drew him to an already harvested section of the vineyard that looked down into the valley below. Flashes of silver in the dark suggested that a river flowed down there. Perhaps in the daylight he might even see a town. But for now, all he could make out was the shapes of hills and a few contours of the land. Behind them, the torches cast fingers of light in their direction.

“This is one of my favorite views in the daylight,” Olivia said quietly, settling herself on the ground. Andrew sat down beside her, privately wondering when the last time was that he’d sat directly on the ground. The outdoor entertainments in Vienna had been carefully planned excursions to the Black Forest, complete with tents and chairs and glass goblets. He could imagine what his friends—what his best friend, Camden Mathison—would say, seeing him now.

“You’re lost in thought.” Olivia drew him back to the present.

“I find myself swamped with reflections,” Andrew admitted. “I’ve been away from this life for a long time, not all of it by choice. Being here today brings it all back.”

“You were raised here?” She queried, somewhat surprised by the reference. He’d mentioned earlier that he’d spent some time in this area, but being raised here was far different from merely paying a visit.

“Near Fiesole. I lived with my mother’s parents until I was fifteen. My father was English. He left when I was two. He had a brother who needed him in England, and my mother did not wish to leave her home. By then the romance had dried up between them. If she’d ever changed her mind about joining him later, the growing wars with Napoleon put paid to any such notion.” Andrew shrugged in the darkness. His father’s desertion had always been something he’d tried to treat with nonchalance but had yet to succeed.

“My mother became ill when I was fifteen. She wrote to my father when it was obvious she would not recover, and my father sent for me. My grandparents were old and they knew the benefits of being raised by an English nobleman, even if he was a second son.” His grandparents had understood better than he had at the time how important it was that he make the trip under the terms his father had negotiated. With his connections, his father could guarantee him safe passage, with diplomats, that his mother and he could not have managed on their own.

In terms of practicality it was a good decision, although a hard one. There had been the opportunity for education, the opportunity to take advantage of his uncle’s associations as the earl.

Thanks to those contacts, he'd been given the chance to put his love of history to use in the diplomatic corps and he had the chance to travel with a certain intellectually elite crowd. When the time came, he'd have a chance to make an active political career as an Member of Parliament, a chance to sit in the minister's foreign cabinet. He could not have expected anything near that if he'd stayed in Italy.

"I was well taken care of in my father's household. But I never forgot my other life," he said simply. "And you, Contessa, you have traveled the reverse path to mine. I started here and went to England. You started in England and came here. Why didn't you go back when your husband died?" Andrew turned the conversation in quiet tones. He leaned back on his arms, looking up at the sky with its early stars, letting the darkness work its magic. The night cocooned them. The night would keep their confidences.

"I hadn't liked England all that much to start with. The Season bored me and after two such Seasons, my parents began to fear I wouldn't make a match. My father was a baron. We weren't wealthy by ton standards and another Season was out of the question. My father wanted there to be some fortune left for my brother to inherit. There was an Italian noble in London that Season, escorting his much younger cousin on a grand tour of sorts right after Napoleon's first defeat when people were beginning to travel again.

“I think he understood my dilemma. We didn’t exactly fall in love, but we did fall into friendship and he brought me here as his wife. We had five good years together. When he died, I couldn’t bring myself to leave. I love the land, the life, too much to ever go back.” She cocked her head to look at him, the heavy spill of her hair falling to one side in a tantalizing curtain.

“You understand that, I think,” she said softly, her gaze probing his, looking for validation.

Yes, yes, yes, his soul cried out. No one had grasped what this life had once meant to him, what it still meant. Not even Camden or St. Just had quite comprehended what he felt for the place of his youth. But this woman, whom he’d met only hours ago, voiced his sentiments precisely. Sitting with her now, Andrew was overcome with the sensation that he’d known her far longer than their acquaintance suggested.

The primal urge to claim her, to unite himself with her, body and soul, surged up again within him, unwilling to be tamped down yet again. Andrew leashed the primal animal in him for the time being. He wanted to begin gently at least. A starving man who eats too quickly does his stomach no favors. So too, rushing the passion in a frenzied seduction might risk ruining the possibilities altogether.

Andrew studied her in the dim light of the torches. She was still sitting upright, her head tilting to one side to take in his reclining pose. Her eyes were bright

agates in the firelight, shining with anticipation as if she understood after their quiet exchange of conversation the evening could end no other way. She was willing.

“Come to me, Olivia.” Andrew reached up for her, drawing her down to him, on to him so that she was spared the roughness of the ground. He was on his back now, she was above him, letting him deepen the kiss, her body pressed to his, luring him into instant and painful arousal. He regretted the lack of a blanket. His body wanted desperately to roll her beneath him and take charge of the situation. Their current position afforded her not only comfort but a certain amount of control as well.

She was not oblivious to the situation and used it to her advantage. Andrew felt her hands on his chest, falling lower until they reached the waistband of his trousers. They pulled his shirt free and pushed it up revealing the hard planes of his torso. She leaned forward to steal a kiss, her breasts erotically skimming his bare skin.

Andrew brought his hands to the full undersides of her breasts, cupping them through the thin fabric of her blouse, his thumbs finding her sensitive nipples. She bit back a cry of pleasure at the delicate contact. But the stifled cry had done its job. Her pleasure fired him at the very core of his manhood. His primal passions slipped their leash at last, free to run. This time he let them go, making no attempt to rein them in. Their situation left him few options. He could not join with

her. The ground was too rough and he had no guarantee he could offer her any protection. His restraint was sufficiently shattered at this point and he doubted he could count on himself to withdraw at the crucial moment if it went that far, and he felt sure it would. That left only one choice.

She writhed against him, her desire matching his in its fevered pitch. Andrew bunched up her skirts, letting the light of the torches and rising moon illumine the bare expanse of her thighs. His fingers sought the shadowy place between them with knowing accuracy. She gasped at the first gentle touch. He felt her wetness and pressed forward, focused only on her pleasure, focused only on the desire that chased across her face in waves until at last he sent her over the edge of that precipice and she collapsed against him.

His own member still thrummed, searching for its relief. That would have to wait. The sight of her slaking her own pleasure, the warm weight of her against him...these things were heady release enough for now. There was an indefinable ecstasy in the moment: the stars above him, a woman in his arms and the smell of the harvest around him. This was all man truly needed; this was the sum and core of existence.

Suddenly, Olivia stirred and slid from him. Her hair hung between them and he could not read her face. "I must beg your pardon," she said. "You will think me wanton for such behavior."

Was that regret? Shame? Andrew had not expected this. She had not seemed to be a person who would

shrink from passion. “I think you are a woman who is not afraid to seek her pleasure. There is no shame in that,” Andrew said slowly, evenly, sitting up beside her.

She rose immediately, putting distance between them. “We must help the others. The night grows late.” She was all business again. He knew in the darkness she was not smiling. He watched her brush off her skirts and head towards the light. Whether she recognized it or not, they were going to finish what they’d started, not necessarily because his mission depended on it, but because his body—and quite suddenly his soul—demanded it.

Chapter IV

The villa slept around her but sleep would not come. By rights, Olivia should have been exhausted from the long day. She'd worked hard in the vat, later in the vineyard itself. However, her mind could not let go of the impassioned encounter with the Englishman. Her plan had gone horribly awry almost instantly after its inception. Had he guessed her intentions and usurped them, using them as his own? She'd been embarrassed at the end, once reality had returned. He'd read her too easily.

He'd been right. She'd not been embarrassed at her own passionate response. She had been embarrassed by how quickly she'd given into it without any thought for her original plan. Instead of leading him slowly towards a building desire that frustrated and blinded him so that he would spill his secrets, she'd jumped headlong into what should have been the culmination of her machinations.

Olivia gave up on bed and pulled a warm knitted wrap about the shoulders of her nightgown. No one would be about. She could wander the back terrace at will and let her thoughts loose.

The stone of the terrace was cool beneath her bare feet, bringing reason to her heated senses. At least now she knew what she was up against: a master seducer and her own desires. She had to think of what to do next, how best to turn those potential liabilities into assets. If nothing else, tonight she'd confirmed what she'd suspected in the winery. He was indeed physically attracted to her, even if she had her confirmation at great expense to her pride.

Still, part of her wanted to recall other things that happened on the hillside. When he'd talked of growing up in Fiesole, she'd sensed a great sincerity, as if the story wasn't calculated for any particular response. She had thought fleetingly that here was a man who quite possibly saw the world as she did, who shared her passion for Italy. Perhaps he even understood why she'd had no desire to return to England—because he'd felt it too.

She'd do well not to give into that flight of fancy. Such wistfulness could only put a dangerous construction on the framework of their relationship. She could ill afford that. Regardless of his effect on her, she had to remember her goals. She had to figure out why he was here and what he'd been sent to do. She had to remember at all times that he was a British diplomat from Vienna, that he was here to tamp down the revolution so dear to Piero's heart, through whatever means available. It was her self-appointed task to discover what those means were.

Olivia stiffened at the far end of the terrace. She could feel his presence before she even turned. He was here, and her anger suddenly rose. She wasn't quite ready for him yet.

"Am I intruding?" he asked.

"You know you are," she said, hearing the hard tones in her voice. He'd known he was intruding. He'd been intruding since the moment he'd refused to be dismissed in the winery this afternoon.

She could feel him ignoring yet another dismissal. He was moving closer to her. All thoughts of games, of sensual strategies to provoke confidences, fled from her head. She whirled on him, fueled by her anger—at him for interrupting her well-ordered world, and at herself for being so susceptible even when she knew better. "What are you doing here?"

A wolfish smile took his lips. "I'm finishing what I started."

"That's not what I meant. Why have you come here at all?" she demanded.

"Do you really need an answer to that?" His blue eyes glowed like the inner heat of a candle's flame. Never had a man looked at her with such intensity. But she was not so far gone under the spell of his desire that she did not recognize the elements of his searing gaze. There was a challenge in his eyes along with the passion.

She gave a haughty toss of her head and found the space to step back, to establish distance enough to fight. "You're here to finish what St. Just could not.

You're here to seduce my secrets." She confronted him with the truth. It was ridiculous for them to go on pretending his presence was otherwise.

He lifted a blond brow in curiosity. "You found St. Just resistible?"

Was that a spark of relief she saw flash in his eyes? A prideful manly relief that he was not following in his friend's wake? That the pleasure he'd given her on the hillside was unique? It was gone as quickly as it had come, and Olivia met his gaze evenly, pushing her thoughts aside. "Any smart woman can resist St. Just. He's broken inside. He'll never mean anything but trouble to all women except one."

Andrew gave a wry smile. "I have long suspected that that might be the case." He stepped forward, invading her hard-won space and reached a finger up to delicately trace her lips. "I, on the other hand, would definitely love to seduce you. Women don't find me any trouble at all." His voice was a low whisper as his lips brushed the column of her neck. His hands cupped her bottom through the thin material of her nightclothes, pressing her hips firmly against the jutting proof of his statement. His predatory wolfish nature was now carefully concealed behind eyes that twinkled instead of seared, and a smile that laughed instead of stalked. But why bother with stalking? Olivia thought briefly. She'd already been caught, and he knew it with every confident, arrogant bone in his gorgeous body.

Olivia melted into him, let him take her mouth in a long, claiming kiss. She knew that doing so was tantamount to agreement. It was not wrong to want him. She was young and she'd been alone for so long. No one would know if she took one night of pleasure for herself against all the empty nights that had passed and those that would follow. Even if someone knew of her indiscretion, there would be no condemnation. A discreet lover from time to time was expected, even the norm. The conundrum was that she'd chosen him. Of all the men she'd chanced to meet at entertainments, none of them had drawn her like this Englishman, none of them had immediately wormed their way into her senses, aroused her passions to a fever pitch that obliterated reason just as he was doing now.

Her nightgown found its way to her waist, courtesy of his questing hands. The evening air on her most private areas provided a potent aphrodisiac, heightening her need. He gave a low satisfying groan at finding her naked beneath the gown. Her hands dropped to the waistband of his trousers and worked the fastenings to free his manhood. This time, there would be pleasure for them both.

She wrapped her hand around the thick length of him, heard him give a rasping, possessive growl deep in his throat that bespoke intense desire. The playfulness that had so briefly defined their interlude was gone now, thoroughly eradicated by the commanding needs claiming them both. Olivia tested

her power, the pad of her thumb caressed the moist tip of his penis.

His response was fierce and immediate. Strong arms lifted her to the stone balustrade of the terrace. Her own core was throbbing now as he took his place between her thighs, his member perfectly positioned for entrance as her legs twined about his waist.

She cried out as he came into her. He filled her, his presence deep inside teasing her to new heights of frenzied want. The last vestiges of caution warned her that she should cry out her joy into the muffled realm of his shoulder but those vestiges were quickly overpowered by her innate desire to cry out her pleasure to the moon. He thrust hard and she tossed her head back, giving her pleasure complete reign letting the fullness of the climax take her.

Andrew let go his own thundering release, which was made even more satisfying by the knowledge that Olivia had claimed a part of the ecstasy they'd created for her own. Women had climaxed before in his arms but nothing prepared him, moved him, as much as the sight of Olivia's completion. He loved her boldness, her head raised to the sky as she gave herself over to the delight of their coupling. She rested against him, her breathing coming slowly as the initial rush ebbed away, her head on his chest. No doubt she could feel his own hammering heart regain its normal beat.

His only regret was that there wasn't a bed close at hand. Now that the initial fierceness of his desire had been momentarily slaked, Andrew wanted nothing more than to lay her down on a soft bed and seek out their mutual pleasure at leisure. The absence of a bed prompted him to remember her position on the stone balustrade. Gently, Andrew lifted her down and helped her draw her nightgown over her hips. He held her close for a moment, savoring the warm look in her coffee eyes. The eyes that had been so sharp earlier now looked upon him softly.

She spoke softly too, her hands fisting in the loose fabric of his shirt. But her words were harsh. "Well, we've seduced each other, and as far as I can tell, neither one of us has acquired the other's secrets. What happens next?"

A pinpoint of anger pricked at him. He was too much a man of the world to so readily call what had transpired between them "love" but he would not allow her to make this encounter into something superficial, the mere fulfilling of animal needs. He quelled his anger. He kept his voice calm, a hand rising to cup her cheek. "I will not let you demean what happened here by categorizing it as anything other than extraordinary. I would like to think that this had nothing to do secrets or missions."

She gave him a sad, brittle smile. "You are, of course, entitled to think that." She pushed past him, heading for the house with her head held high, but not

before Andrew saw the glimmer of a tear at the corner of her eye.

Chapter V

Olivia shut her bedroom door and braced her back against it as if she expected Andrew Truesdale to break it down at any moment. Not that he would. Not after the words they'd exchanged on the terrace. No man pursued a woman who so readily affirmed having ulterior motives for conducting a liaison. It was a well-armed ego that could stand up to such an admission—assuming the person in possession of the ego believed the person in possession of the lie.

That was the real reason she was braced against the door, waiting for Andrew to make an appearance. She *had* lied on the terrace in a last desperate attempt to thwart the passion that had welled so easily between them. And he'd known. Her passion had not been feigned in the least. Her lie was a poor effort to convince them both otherwise.

Her response to the Englishman had been immediate and intense, taking her entirely by surprise. She'd so swiftly forgotten all of her plans to seduce his secrets from him. One hot glance from him, one gentle caress, and she'd been willing to abandon her plans in exchange for her own pleasure. Was that also true of

him, or had he too made plans to seduce her secrets out from under her? Had he been acting?

He'd sounded incredibly sincere with all his protests about the uniqueness of what they'd shared. But isn't that what every woman wanted to hear? Especially from a handsome man who had plenty of experiences to compare it to? Did she dare believe him any more than he'd believed her lie?

Her heart wanted to believe him. Yet, when she'd baldly stated that she knew he was there to seduce her secrets, he'd not denied it. He'd merely moved the conversation in another direction. And in the end, he had not given pursuit.

Olivia eased away from the door, reluctant to admit that he'd stayed on the terrace or sought his own room. Such a course of action was for the best. If he'd shown up he wouldn't have had to break the door down no matter what she liked to pretend. All he would have had to do was knock and ask for entrance. She'd been a dreadfully easy conquest and she had little to show for it.

“Did he say why he was here?” Piero asked, catching her alone in the barn the next morning.

Olivia sighed and straightened from her task. She'd spent the morning trying to avoid both Piero and Andrew. Andrew was in the vineyards, but it was too much to hope for that Piero might be there also.

“You know why he’s here,” Olivia said in low tones. They were alone, but one couldn’t be too cautious when one plotted revolution.

Piero smiled easily and shook his head. “I know why he’s here. But what is he going to do about it?”

“I don’t know. I hardly know him well enough to bring such a subject up without looking supremely suspicious,” Olivia said briskly, throwing her energies into tossing straw with a pitchfork. “It hardly matters what he’s here to do. He’s here because he knows you’re into a plot up to your neck.”

Piero shrugged negligently. “There is no proof, just talk in salons. He can do nothing.”

“Yet.” Olivia stopped throwing straw and leaned on the pitchfork. “There’ll be proof enough after Friday,” she said crossly. “You’ve got to stop the wagon.” On Friday, the neighbors would come with their wagons full of olives for the mill to press. One of the many wagons would be driven by Piero’s co-conspirator. It would contain olives and beneath the wagon’s false bottom would be the first supply of arms for the cause.

Piero laughed at her fears. “Dear cousin, he has no reason to suspect a wagon full of arms.”

“You must keep your voice down!” Olivia hissed at his flagrant violation of caution. “Such carelessness will see you hanged.”

“I will not stop the wagon. It will slip in under his nose and he’ll be none the wiser. This is only the first and most minor of dangers that will have to be faced in the future. Freedom doesn’t come without a price,”

Piero said, his eyes sparking with the excitement of his latest venture.

Olivia sighed but said nothing. There was no getting through to Piero when he was like this. She understood, even sympathized with his cause. Italy should be united into a single country. But Piero was careless. He meant well when he spoke of danger, but she doubted he truly understood what he risked in being caught.

Piero thrust his hands deep in his pockets and tossed her a cocky grin before leaving. “Everything will be fine. You’ll see.” He whistled a country tune and headed out into the morning.

Olivia had only just turned back to her task of putting fresh straw into the horses’ stalls when a shadow fell across the barn floor.

“Piero said I could find you here.”

Andrew.

Goodness, when had the barn ever been such a busy social venue? Irritated, Olivia didn’t bother to turn around.

“Is there something you want?” Olivia asked crossly. She regretted saying it immediately, imagining all the flippant responses and flirtatious avenues her comment opened up for Andrew.

A moment later his hands were fitted at her waist, his voice teasing in her ear. “I wanted *you*, actually.”

Well, she’d seen that comment coming. But it didn’t stop the undeniable thrill that coursed through

her at the feel of his hands, so possessive, on her waist, his strong fingers pressing gently against her hips.

He must have sensed her reluctance to play the flirtatious game with him. “The vineyards are nearly clear thanks to the hard work last night. I’m only in the way while the others finish up. I thought I would ride over to my grandparents’ old property today. I hoped you would come with me.”

He gave a light breath, tickling her ear deliciously. “Say yes, Olivia. Piero assures me there is nothing to keep you here.”

Against her better judgment, Olivia found herself mounted on her hardy bay mare and headed down the drive behind Andrew’s stallion within the hour. She told herself she’d accepted his invitation because it would provide an opportunity to try again and discover the entirety of his mission. But it was a weak argument at best. A large part of her knew she’d accepted the invitation because she wanted to.

What was there not to want? The fall air was crisp, the sun shone overhead. Andrew sat his horse beautifully, like one born to the saddle, his shoulders squared, his body in perfect control, the consummate Englishman. How her parents and her brother would adore him. Her family loved to ride, loved anything to do with horses. The path widened enough to let the two horses travel side by side. She pulled into the space next to him, making small talk, trying to pretend last night hadn’t happened. It was not as hard as she’d expected. Once they arrived in Florence, the bustle of

the city made it difficult to converse. When they took the road towards Fiesole and headed out into the country, Andrew made it easy.

He was talkative, full of stories, as they neared the property, his features taking on an endearing boyish quality in his excitement. “The blackberry bush is still here. Oh my, look how it’s grown,” Andrew exclaimed, gesturing to a wild, overgrown bush that looked more like a hedge extending in the distance. “I used to bring a pail out here and pick berries all day when I was little.” He gave a laugh. “I think it was one of the ways my *nonna* would keep me out of trouble.”

Olivia laughed with him. How could she not? His happiness was contagious. “You must have been quite a handful.” It was easy to picture him as a blue-eyed, blond-haired bundle of energy running free over these hills.

“Here’s the road to the farm.” Andrew turned his horse on to a path leading away from the road.

The path narrowed and Olivia fell behind him. The path climbed slightly. A stucco farmhouse came into view and Andrew pushed his horse into a fast trot. Olivia sensed his excitement and a certain amount of anxiety now that he was here. Surely his grandparents weren’t still alive? Andrew must know that already.

Andrew reined in his horse and dismounted swiftly, coming to her side and helping her down. “It’s just as I remembered it, only older.”

He called out a greeting and knocked on the farmhouse door. A middle-aged woman answered the

knock, staring at the unexpected visitors. Andrew quickly shifted into Italian, explaining who he was.

Olivia suppressed a smile. The woman was clearly susceptible to Andrew's charm. She waved a hand towards a gated area and told them to look around as much as they liked. She would bring a lunch out to them later.

Andrew had led her through orchards, vineyards and groves of olives, telling stories the whole time. "I fell out of that tree when I was eight." "I would swim in that stream in the summers." "I had a rope swing here in the vineyard." The memories poured from him and Olivia found it intoxicating.

By the time lunch arrived, the food was welcome. Olivia's stomach grumbled from the exertions of their ramblings. The woman, perhaps sensing their desire for privacy, left a basket of food and a cask of wine on a blanket spread beneath a tree.

"Food!" Olivia cried delightedly. She sank down on the blanket and pulled out a wheel of sharp cheese and a loaf of crusty bread. There were apples too, crisp like the autumn air.

They ate with relish, Olivia full of questions about his grandparents. "They must have loved you very much," she said at last, savoring the final bite of her apple.

"I was blessed to know such love abundantly," Andrew said, his gaze going to the tree trunk behind her.

“What is it?” Olivia asked, turning to look behind her.

Andrew rose slowly. “I can’t believe its still here.” His voice was almost reverent. He traced a faded etching with his forefinger. Olivia had not noticed the carving at first, but it stood out now as he traced it.

D R E W

“Drew?” she said softly, questioningly.

He nodded somberly. “My *nonna* called me Drew.” His finger sketched over each letter. “I carved this the day before I left for England. I guess I thought it would be a way to leave a piece of me behind.” His voice was quiet now, his earlier exuberance diminished.

Ah, Olivia thought. The darker side of the story, the sad ending to all the happiness he’d shared with her today. She could see him now as a fifteen-year-old boy caught, as boys that age are, between boyhood and manhood, struggling to come to grips with the momentous decision that had been made about his life. Perhaps, even that last day here at the farm came to define for him the last day of childhood.

She reached out and took his hand, squeezing it. “Drew. It fits you.” The nickname suited him. She glanced up to take in his profile, the sharp nose, the finely boned jaw line, aristocratic lines to be sure but something more, an openness. Andrew was a name that belonged to a stuffy, prudish Englishman. But

“Drew” belonged to this man who had so openly shared his favorite memories with her. There was an intimacy in such sharing that could not be matched.

“There’s one more place. Will you come with me?” Andrew rose and brushed at his trousers. He held out his hand to her, his eyes solemn. Whatever he wanted to show her, it was immensely private and meaningful to him.

They didn’t speak as he led the way through an overgrown path that backed away from the orchards. An old wooden fence set off a square of a land, a large tree growing in the center of the space. Three shapes loomed beneath the tree. Olivia knew immediately where they were: Andrew’s family cemetery.

She released his hold on her hand and let him go forward alone through the little gate. Olivia followed a short distance behind him, wanting him to have his privacy. He stooped and absently cleared away some of the twigs and detritus that had accumulated over the years. Andrew ran a hand over the stone markers, dusting away the dirt. She could see the dates roughly etched into the stones.

“This one’s my mother’s,” he said, softly tracing the 1811 date with a finger. The other two were marked 1815, within months of one another. “She was beautiful, all sunshine and light. I remember thinking I was the luckiest boy alive to have such a lovely mother.”

Olivia stepped up beside him and slipped her hand through his.

“Thank you.” She offered somewhat shyly, suddenly hesitant in the wake of the latest disclosure. “Thank you for sharing this place, this day with me.”

She wasn’t sure he’d heard her. He seemed far away in the mists of his remembrances. He bowed his head for a moment and then led them back down the path to the picnic blanket.

“I never saw them again,” he said abruptly when they’d reached the blanket. “My last memory is of all three of them standing in the doorway waving goodbye as the carriage moved down the drive. I knew it would likely be the last time I saw them, so I concentrated hard enough to recall every detail. I promised them I would come back.”

“And you did,” Olivia said softly, sensing how much it meant to this man that he’d fulfilled his promise. She met his gaze and their eyes held. Today had not been about his mission and her secret. Today had been about two people connecting in a warm and powerful way through the stories of his youth. The current between them began to flow, this time down a gentler path than their previous encounters. There was a tender regard as his eyes searched hers. His head bent to catch her lips and she gave her mouth up to him, her body up to him; it would be all too easy to also offer her very soul. As he laid her down on the worn blanket and guided them towards the pleasure that awaited, Olivia thought silently, *Drew, I love you.*

Chapter VI

It was a thought that Olivia forced to remain unexamined over the next days. “I love you” was too deep a statement to probe, and she feared ruining the pure joy that had prompted her mental response in the first place with too much introspection. Nonetheless, it was clear a turning point had been reached. She had taken to calling him Drew. He had taken to following her with his eyes whenever she was near. He appeared in time to carry her filled olive baskets while they worked in the grove, and took every opportunity to sprinkle her day with light touches on her shoulder, at her waist, a few stolen kisses at her neck. All of which were promises of the night to come and the pleasures it would bring.

Olivia was happy and she vowed to seize that happiness for whatever short time she could. She pushed aside all thoughts of cold-blooded seduction. She couldn’t quite push aside the niggling worry that perhaps he’d had the same plan in mind and had simply been better at it, but she found that hard to believe because Andrew—Drew—had opened up to her so fully at his grandfather’s farm. It seemed impossible that he could be capable of looking at her

with such sincere longing while being duplicitous in his intentions.

Neither could she entirely ignore the reality that time was running out. Already the olive mill was beginning to press the crops of nearby neighbors who'd harvested early. Soon, the trickle of wagons needing the services of the mill would grow to a long line and within that line of wagons journeying to her mill would be the one carrying Piero's shipments of arms. Either Drew would learn what he had come here to find out or he wouldn't. In any case, he would eventually return to Vienna and this happy interlude would end.

However limited their time together, there was no such statute of limitations on the truth. Olivia couldn't bear the thought of Drew discovering at a later date that there had indeed been a plot. He would think that she'd deliberately concealed it from him by conducting their affair. Such a consideration sat poorly with her. But she did not want to blurt out the plot and risk Piero facing more than a scolding. If only she knew whether she could trust Drew completely.

Olivia was distracted and restless tonight, Andrew reflected, moving his arm yet again so she could get comfortable against his shoulder. There'd been an underlying desperate quality to their lovemaking that she'd not successfully hidden from him.

“Liv, what is it?” he asked softly in the darkness of the bedroom they covertly shared by night.

She raised herself up on one arm, letting the dark spill of her hair cascade down one side in seductive, tousled waves. He could get hard just looking at her like this—as his body was proving right now with its early stirrings. Her eyes were worried though, and that worried him.

“Why are you here, Drew? What have you come to do?” she asked, her eyes searching his face in the dark.

He rolled to his side and turned up the wick of the lamp on the bedside table, making it easy for her. He’d known this conversation was coming, no matter how often he tried to push it from his mind in the past week. His only hope was that now the conversation would take place in a different context: that of lovers who harbored genuine affection for one another, as opposed to two combatants who had set out to seduce one another. Neither of them had been very successful in that regard.

“I don’t think I am telling you anything you don’t already know,” Andrew said, rolling back to face her. “St. Just thought there might be substance to the rumors that someone at the villa was involved in a national liberation movement.”

“And if they were? What would you do?” She worried her bottom lip waiting for his answer.

“I would insist they cease at once. The time is not right. Britain will not come to the aid of any Italian rebels just now. Any Italian movement that succeeds

in uniting Italy has to take the lands north of here from the Austro-Hungarians. No amount of negotiating will accomplish that. Austro-Hungary is determined to hang on to their holdings in Northern Italy. Wrestling those lands away will only be achieved through battle, a battle Italian rebels cannot win on their own at the moment. Britain will not risk the balance of power in Europe to aid the Italians. Not yet.”

He stared at her intently, watching her face for signs of a reaction. It was starting to dawn on him that it might be she who was thick in the plot. He'd assumed all along, as had St. Just, that the plotter was Piero. Her cousin seemed just the sort of young, idealistic man to embrace the philosophies of such a cause without considering the realities. *Please, don't let it be her*, Andrew thought fervently. How would he protect her if it was? If she wouldn't listen to reason?

Her brow furrowed and she seemed to be grappling with some internal debate that excluded him. “So you're not here to turn anyone over to the authorities?” She tested the waters with a surprising amount of candor.

Andrew shook his head. “No. I am here to deliver my message and hope that it's listened to with good sense in mind. The time is not yet.”

His answer pleased her. Some of the tension the situation had acquired lessened, but he could sense there was more.

“Drew,” she said softly. “There's something I have to tell you.”

He didn't want to know. "Will it make a difference?" he asked, trying to mask the uneasiness growing inside him. He'd delivered his message moments ago. If the plotter was her, surely she'd understand that nothing more need to be done. They could get on with being lovers and put this behind them. Never once when he'd imagined this assignment had he thought he'd be delivering Britain's foreign-policy lecture stark naked in bed with a delectable woman.

"It will make a difference to me, Drew," Olivia whispered, drawing closer to him now, her hands beginning some light foreplay, stroking his chest. "There's a wagon coming the day after tomorrow. It carries arms. I've asked Piero to stop the shipment, but he says there's no reason to—unless you are suspicious."

Relief coursed through him. It was Piero after all. He saw her plan to protect her cousin clearly. He smiled. "And you want me to be suspicious enough tomorrow to get him to call off the delivery?"

"Yes."

"I can do that." The plan was simplicity itself, but it would accomplish a great many things that eased the burden for them both. He gently wound a long strand of hair around his finger. "You know, if there's no wagon, I won't have anything to report," he whispered huskily, leaning in to claim her mouth with his.

"Yes, I know that," she breathed.

“I think that’s a brilliant idea.” Andrew nipped at her neck.

“If you think that’s brilliant, I have another idea.” Olivia ran her hand up the expanse of his thigh, finding the warm length of him. She gave a delicate squeeze that made him shudder in anticipation.

“Oh, I like this idea even better,” Andrew remarked before giving himself up to it entirely.

Andrew rose early, reluctantly leaving Olivia and the warm bed. He wanted to catch Piero before the villa was bustling with workers. This discussion, while simple, needed to be handled with tact. He didn’t want Piero’s decision to be influenced by excessive pride. He well understood the role pride played in decision-making. If people were around, their privacy to speak freely would be inhibited, and he didn’t want the presence of others to unduly influence Piero to err on the side of stubbornness.

The second factor that needed to be handled delicately was Olivia’s role in all this. Olivia cherished her friendship with Piero. Andrew didn’t want to damage that by implying that Olivia had told him outright about the shipment. More importantly, there were more people to consider than Piero. What if word of her actions spread beyond Piero? What would her neighbors think of her? Would they understand she had acted in their best interest, or would they paint her with a traitor’s brush? If they did, her life and

livelihood would change drastically. It was possible that people would no longer come to her olive mill or that merchants would no longer buy her crops in town. The news could be economically damaging, to say nothing of the social ramifications, the isolation such news could produce. Andrew did not want that for her after he left.

When he left. The thought slowed his step. Andrew turned from his course and detoured through a room that led out on to the wide terrace. He took a deep breath of the cold morning air and let it pierce his lungs and bathe him in its freshness. The sun was newly risen; mists were still low on the ground, veiling the hillside and its crops like a bride. Andrew surveyed the land with satisfaction, feeling in his bones that the first frost was impending, maybe a week away. For him, there was a subtle joy in knowing the harvest would be safe inside barns and casks and vats. Growing up surrounded by farming as he had, the first frost had always meant the end of the season. Even when he'd moved away, that memory had stayed with him.

Andrew leaned on the balustrade, bracing himself with his hands. *When he left.* He could hardly contemplate leaving this world of the villa, this world of Italian life, behind him again. More importantly, he couldn't fathom leaving Olivia. It seemed impossible that if he chose, he could ride out of here within days. He would know soon enough if the wagon arrived or not. He knew already that he would not avail himself

of a speedy departure, wagon or not. He could send his findings by mail to St. Just in Naples and the viscount could send them along to Vienna via diplomatic courier. Yes, there were ways he could prolong his stay.

Such a choice only put off the inevitable. He would have to leave sometime. The expectation was that he'd be back in Vienna for Christmas and the round of New Year's parties. Never had the thought of the elaborate Viennese balls and holiday routs seemed so colorless. But all else paled by comparison to the landscape that stretched before him, to the passion that filled his bed each night.

Andrew shook his head. He had to be careful here. It was more than passion that filled his bed. What had sprung up between him and Olivia was more than the pleasures of physical mating. Their pleasure stemmed from a well that was dug deeper than that.

He spotted Piero in the lifting mists down by a workshed laying out tools for the day's labors. He'd better stop his ruminations and get his job done. Andrew straightened. He waved to Piero as the other man looked up and saw him.

"Buon giorno." Piero greeted him with an easy smile. "You're up early."

"I wanted to talk with you before it got busy," Andrew said, joining in to carry a load of baskets to the wagon that would go up to the olive grove.

"Ah, is it about Olivia? Do you think you need to ask me for her hand?" Piero elbowed him playfully.

Piero's eyes danced with mischief. He was so carefree, it was difficult to see him in the role of revolutionary. Here, Andrew had to be especially careful. He didn't want to impugn Olivia's honor. It had been a rather fanciful hope that no one had noticed the relationship between them. But to have the relationship so boldly acknowledged did create a certain level of expectation that would have to be dealt with. But not now. Andrew could not allow himself to be sidetracked so easily.

Andrew set the load of baskets down on the wagon gate and faced the other man, a man who'd become his friend. "No, at least not today. I have come to talk with you about some suspicions I'd like you to put to rest."

Piero's easy smile faded slightly. "What would those suspicions be?"

"St. Just wrote to me that he strongly thought you were involved in a nationalist movement that was in the early stages of planning."

Piero laughed, but it wasn't his usual merry laugh. "Do the British diplomats in Vienna have nothing more to do than hare around the continent at the mere hint of an uprising?"

"St. Just felt this 'hint' was rather more substantiated than that," Andrew said forcefully. "Because of the people involved, he felt this one might actually gain some momentum."

Piero cut him off before he could finish. "This one might actually succeed?" He nearly crowed with satisfaction.

Andrew saw the other man's instant train of thought. Really, Piero was too transparent. A fervent nationalist he might be, but an apt plotter where discretion and secrecy were required, he was not. "No," Andrew said sharply. "He felt this one might actually gain some momentum before it was shut down in a manner that would make other groups of the same mind think twice."

Piero sighed heavily and kicked at a pebble in the dirt. "So Britain will not aid us?"

Andrew shook his head. "Not yet."

"When? Britain intervened with Portugal, with Spain. Why not us?" Piero argued.

"The time is not right, and it may not be right for many years." Andrew hated to be the bearer of disappointing news, but it was the truth, as he knew it in Vienna. If Italy was waiting for Britain, it would have to wait some time. "Don't do anything reckless, Piero, and you'll be around to see it." Andrew joked softly to make amends.

Piero stared at the half-loaded wagon, his mind clearly weighing the import of what Andrew had shared. Andrew seized the moment to deliver the last part of his message, hoping Piero's mind was clear enough now to fully understand what he was going to say.

"I don't know how far along your plans are, Piero. If you've got as far as arms shipments, cancel them immediately. I can't possibly report on supplies I haven't seen."

Piero met his gaze squarely. Andrew continued, “With all the wagons arriving today and tomorrow for the olive mill, it would be a perfect time to smuggle in arms. To my way of thinking, another wagon wouldn’t be noticed. I must write an initial report to my superiors in Vienna. If I cannot get your word that you’ll stop supply deliveries, I will search every wagon so that I have something to write home about in regards to my active efforts. I have a job to do. Surely you can understand that.” And surely Piero could understand the implied message too, that he’d be allowed to use any means at his disposal. He didn’t have to search the wagons if this first attempt to stop the delivery was successful.

Piero looked thoughtful, his mind no doubt going over alternatives and loopholes. “What if the delivery is merely diverted to another location? What is there to stop the movement altogether?”

Andrew held Piero’s gaze. Although he wished for it, he had not expected Piero to capitulate to his request easily. Whatever Piero lacked in subtlety he made up for in determination. Whatever else Piero was, he was committed to his cause. “There is nothing but your word,” Andrew said simply, “and the affection that you and I both bear your cousin.” Andrew paused, weighing his next words. “You don’t make this choice only for yourself. You make it for Olivia too. Your commitment to revolution puts her in danger. Have you thought of that?”

Piero's gaze drifted up to the villa. There was a certain level of guilt in that gaze, suggesting that he had not thought beyond his own desires in this matter, as Andrew had suspected. Now, for the first time, Piero was assessing the consequences of his actions and what they meant for Olivia, just as Andrew had done earlier that morning. Piero would need time to come to grips with his decision, whichever he decided.

Piero let out a deep breath. "All right. I will think on it while there's still time. But know that you ask no small thing of me. It is no mean feat to give up one's country."

Andrew did not flinch. "It is also no mean feat to protect the ones we love. Few are those who do not have to choose between the two. A responsible man knows his place and his duty." Piero had not given him an answer, but he had not refused the request either. It was the best Andrew could hope for at the moment.

Piero continued to look past Andrew's shoulder up to the villa. He gave a wave. Andrew turned and saw Olivia. He waved too. She looked lovely in her simple clothes, her hair in a peasant's braid. His heart was apparently in his face as he turned back to Piero. The seriousness was gone from Piero, the usual carefree expression was back.

"It seems you have a choice to make too," Piero said, his merry eyes dancing again as he leaped up on to the wagon and headed towards the vineyards.

Chapter VII

Andrew set his wine glass down and wiped his mouth with a cloth napkin. Dinner had been a succulent affair of fresh vegetables on a bed of pasta, cold wine and crusty bread. Olivia sat across the small table from him on the terrace, her hair loose, her face expectant. They had dined alone this evening, and Andrew knew she was hoping to hear how the conversation with Piero had gone. He knew the answer she was hoping to hear. But it was not an answer he could give her.

“We’ve not been alone all day,” Olivia said a little sharply, laying aside her own napkin. “I cannot decide if that has been by your choice or simply because the day has been full of distractions.”

“The latter,” Andrew said tersely. “I thought you knew me better than that to suspect otherwise.” The conversation was not getting off to a good start. Olivia was prickly, and he could well understand her reasons why, but it didn’t make his message any easier to share. He’d hoped their growing relationship would be strong enough to weather the dilemmas it would soon face.

Olivia had the good grace to look contrite. “What did Piero say?”

Andrew shook his head. “He said he’d think it over. It’s not an outright refusal.” He offered with cautious optimism.

“You don’t know Piero. He’s stubborn to a fault. Usually, I appreciate his ability to persevere, but this time it seems that his obstinacy has blinded him to the realities around him.” Olivia despaired. “What will you do if he persists?”

“I will do what I must,” Andrew replied. She understood the answer in its entirety. The darkness shadowing her eyes, the feel of her withdrawing from him, cut at him. In that moment, he abhorred the idea that they would not be allowed to find their own way in this relationship. It hung in the balance of another man’s decision, another nation’s decision. He remembered Piero’s words from that morning: “Its no mean feat to give up one’s country.” How well he understood. That dilemma was not Piero’s alone, it was his as well. She might understand his answer, but she did not agree with it. Her eyes wanted to challenge him. He forestalled her arguments with a shake of his head.

“What would you have me do, Olivia? I cannot sit idly by and ignore the fact that arms are being shipped under my nose. Neither can I lie and tell my superiors I searched and found nothing. How would I account for such an oversight when fighting breaks out?”

There were other things to account for, too, that went unspoken. His heart cried out, “How would I protect you from those who might come looking for

conspirators? From those who might put you in the line of fire? How would I protect you when I would be miles from here?" If fighting broke out that was unsanctioned by England, a diplomat could not be found anywhere near it without incriminating Britain with covert intentions to overthrow the current Italian system.

Olivia rose from the table, her eyes flashing now. "You think I would ask you to lie?" She made his words sound as if he was somehow impugning her integrity.

Andrew rose too. "You would not have to ask. But I would still have to choose."

Olivia let her retort die on her lips at his reply. She nodded her head and gathered her skirts. "Good night, Drew," she said softly, her gaze wavering, never quite meeting his. "I think its best you don't come to my bed tonight. I would not want anything that passed between us to be misconstrued."

Andrew let her go. He fought the urge to call after her, to beg her not to let Piero's decision affect their chance at happiness, but he had no proof to bolster his claim with. What kind of happiness was he referring to anyway? A happiness that would last another month at best before he had to return to Vienna? Was there a more permanent happiness to be had? Olivia had already made it plain in actions and words that she had no desire to leave Italy. He could not realistically entertain thoughts of whisking her off to Vienna or Britain with him.

There was an alternative to that: he could stay. That too was a monumental step, to turn his back on all that had been planned for him, all the expectations people held for him. He'd talked in strong terms to Piero about responsibility and thinking of others first, and here he was facing the same dilemma.

Andrew leaned on his elbows against the stone balustrade, letting the beauty of Italian twilight wash over him, letting it cleanse his thoughts. When had it all become so complicated? How had loving Olivia become mixed up with stopping an ill-fated revolution? How had his relationship become tied to another's man fate? Other people's choices? Letting those items infringe on the beautiful intimacy that sprung between he and Olivia sullied it.

Andrew raised his head to the ponderous orange moon rising over the poplars. The Italian twilight had done its job. Everything was suddenly clear to him. The dilemma he faced now was no different from what it had ever been. It was still the same: to go or stay? The issue with Piero had simply thrown it into sharp relief. If Olivia loved him, nothing else mattered. He would not sacrifice their relationship on the altar of contingencies and what-ifs.

A shadow sprinted across a beam of moonlight and then disappeared into the darkness. Piero. No doubt off to a pre-planned rendezvous. Calm settled over Andrew. Whatever Piero decided, his own path was clear now.

Piero was waiting for him at breakfast the next morning. The man looked as if he hadn't slept. Andrew was sure he looked much the same way. In spite of his calm, sleep had not befriended him last night either. There was still too much on his mind.

"May I have a word?" Piero asked hesitantly.

Andrew pulled out a chair. "Certainly." He poured strong coffee for them both, hiding the tension that shot through him. This was it. Piero would have an answer for him.

"Thank you," Piero took the steaming cup and drank. Andrew waited patiently.

At last, Piero seemed to gather his thoughts. "Last night I went to meet the arms supplier. I had not yet decided what to do about the revolt. I had thought to go ahead with it. But then I saw the arms. They were in terrible shape, and I knew I could not encourage men to fight without the equipment to succeed. There will be no shipment here. There will be no revolt, not from my group anyway."

Andrew saw the disappointment in Piero's eyes. He understood the other man's frustration. Piero's dream was in a shambles for the time being. "The time will come," Andrew offered. "It's a brave man who thinks of others."

Piero shook his head. "I wasn't brave. I was a coward about the decision. I did not make my choice before I left for the meeting. I let circumstances dictate my decision instead of taking charge myself."

Andrew smiled ruefully over the rim of his cup. He'd faced the same situation last night himself. He was doubly glad he'd taken the reins of his situation into his own hands instead of waiting on Piero's good sense.

Andrew had been about to say something more, but Olivia entered the room, clearly startled to see them both up before her. Andrew moved to pull out her chair and pour her coffee. Piero mumbled a good morning and hastily excused himself, shutting the door behind him.

"I am glad to see you this morning," Andrew began. A lesser man might have been reassured by the dark circles beneath her eyes, taking them as a sign of the depth of her feelings. Andrew took no such pleasure. He would spare her any and all worry if he could. He knew how unpalatable his position had been—loving her and facing the task of possibly punishing her beloved cousin. Her own dilemma was much the same—how could she love the man who could potentially destroy the peace of her little world?

"I have some news," Andrew began, eager to relieve the worry she carried.

She gave a small smile and shook her head. "No, Drew. Before you say anything, I need to tell you something. Whatever happens with Piero is apart from what happens with us. That division was not clear to me last night until I thought about it. I want you to know that before you tell me what Piero has decided. For however long we have, I want it to be understood

that there are no conditions on our relationship. I would not think to buy you or bind you in that way.” She leaned across the table and kissed him gently on the mouth.

He was more than ready for her. Last night had been torturous without her next to him in bed. “I missed you, Liv,” he breathed between kisses. “I have news for you.” He managed to say, feeling, for some ridiculous reason, obliged to carry on their conversation between kisses.

“Shh, Drew. I have something for you too, something I think you’ll like better.” Olivia teased as he gathered her full into his embrace and found a better use for the table than hosting coffee cups.

Chapter VIII

Two weeks later, Andrew sat in the small ornamental garden of the villa, taking advantage of the cool autumn sunshine and fingering a newly arrived letter. Finally, despite his best efforts, he was out of reasons to prolong his stay. With the arrival of the letter, he was also out of time.

St. Just had written from Naples to assure him the report had been forwarded to Vienna by courier. He also invited Andrew to join him in Naples for the duration of his stay so that the two friends could journey home together.

Andrew reread the letter and smiled wryly at St. Just's use of the word "home." Vienna was by no stretch of the imagination his home, no matter how delightful its environs were. He thought wildly that this villa had far more become his home in the past month than anywhere he'd lived after leaving his grandparents. He knew, too, that it was more than the physical surroundings that he found so welcoming. This was where Olivia was.

Soldier on, he told himself. He'd known the end would come, but it was far harder to face in reality than to see it merely looming on the horizon as a

potential. He wasn't the only one fighting this dilemma either. Olivia was gripped with it, too. The last few nights, there had been a level of anxiety to their lovemaking, as if their passion would be enough to hold the morning at bay.

Olivia was just as torn as he. The harvest had been successful. The frosts had come. The annual harvest ball hosted at a neighboring estate would take place in a few days. After that, Olivia would want to remove to her home in town for the winter. She'd been judiciously supervising the preliminaries for such a move all week. She'd done so almost surreptitiously, Andrew thought, hoping he wouldn't notice the different pattern of routine. He knew it was to spare his feelings, to keep him from thinking she was pushing him out of the house. But he knew, too, that she might have already removed to town if it hadn't been for their affair.

Logically, he could move to town with her. Nothing had to end just yet. But such a move had been unspoken between them, mostly because they recognized that it would solve nothing. Moving to town would only buy them another week at most. If he intended to join St. Just in Naples, he had to leave by the second week of November.

A shadow fell across the path. "Brooding, Drew? You've been out here for hours." Olivia smiled gently, a dark green plaid shawl wrapped about her shoulders for warmth. "It's colder than it looks out here. I don't want you getting chilled." Sitting down beside him on

the stone bench, she caught sight of the object in his hand.

“A letter?” she inquired, although Andrew knew she could see clearly that it was.

“St. Just is pleased about the results of my mission.” Andrew supplied, not wanting to mention the invitation.

“You did well. Piero is grateful for your intervention, as am I.” Olivia reached for his free hand and enclosed it in her own. Piero had taken Andrew’s message to heart and stopped the shipment as promised.

“Everything has been wrapped up so neatly, I can scarce believe it,” Andrew began, rubbing her fingers with his thumb where they clasped his. “Normally diplomacy doesn’t work out this way. I had half expected Piero to be displeased enough with my message to extract some petty but damaging retribution. He could have gone to a local tavern and tipped my hand publicly. Or worse, he could have cast aspersions on your involvement in the decision. He did neither of those. He accepted the decision and moved forward.”

Olivia grinned. “You sound disappointed.”

Andrew shifted on the bench so he could better see her face. “I am happy for Piero, he’s taken a great step forward towards becoming a truly responsible gentleman, someone who thinks of others first. If I am disappointed, it is only because I don’t have any more reasons to stay. I had told St. Just that I would remain

for a while and make sure the plans were effectively nullified. It's been a few weeks. All Souls holiday looms. You must remove to town. As I said, everything has been wrapped up neatly."

Their eyes held, and Andrew knew she was thinking of other loose ends that had tidied themselves. Her courses had arrived last week relieving them of any concern over a child. Only he wasn't sure relief was what they'd felt. It certainly wasn't what he'd felt. If there had been a reason to stay, any reason at all, he would grasp it with both hands. All the while, he knew that wasn't the best reason for wanting to become a father. Still, he wouldn't have minded.

"We still have the harvest ball in two nights." Olivia put on a brave smile. Her comment was meant to comfort, but Andrew heard the other message too. Two days until the end.

"We will make the best of what time we have then." Andrew rose and tucked the letter inside the pocket of his coat. "Come, walk with me in the garden, Liv, and tell me the story about the time you fell in the fountain." He grinned, valiantly putting the idea of parting from the woman he loved aside for another time.

Olivia slipped her arm through his and let him lead them through the garden with its boxed hedges and symmetrical patterns. Drew was the most stubborn man she'd ever encountered. It was clear that the man

was in possession of an excellent intellect. He'd skillfully managed his mission with tact and grace, and infringed on no man's pride. The times he'd spoken to her of his role in the diplomatic corps, he'd spoken with great insights on the new Europe being formed. But when it came to matters of the heart, of matters between the two of them, he was too stubborn to see that there were other options. He didn't have to leave. He could stay with her forever, he didn't have to have reasons.

Drew loved reasons. There had to be reasons for everything. Even their affair had started out with a reason, a purpose behind it. Having a reason to stay was part of who he was, she supposed. He was a man who took his duties seriously. The people in Vienna were counting on him. But needing reasons to love her, to stay with her, cast a shadow on their time together. Was there no reason to stay with her? Or was there simply not reason enough?

Drew talked often about his work in Vienna, but she knew very little about his responsibilities in England. Was there an estate waiting for his care? There should be, with all of his skill in land management. Was he expected to go home and marry an English girl? The very thought made her almost physically recoil.

"What is it?" Drew solicited. They'd reached the fountain at the center of the garden.

"Nothing," she lied, willing back the tears that threatened. She didn't want her tears to become a

reason to stay. She wanted more than that from him. She wanted him to give himself to her without a reason. She wanted him to give himself to her simply because he wanted to. It was a fantasy to hope for. She understood what it required, the giving up of a career, of everything he'd been raised to be, whatever that was.

“My letter has upset you.” Drew gathered her in his arms. “I didn’t mean for it to.”

How could she let him go? How could she bear the loss of his arms about her? Olivia didn’t know how to fight the inevitable. All she could do was hang on to him and hope it would be enough, that in time, he would see beyond reason. She stood on tiptoe to reach his mouth, framing his face between her two hands. “Sometimes we don’t need reasons, Drew,” she whispered before she covered his mouth with hers in a long kiss that engulfed them in a potent reminder of the possibilities.

Chapter IX

The harvest ball whirled around them, gathering Olivia and Andrew up in its infectious gaiety. Crops had been good all around and everyone was in high spirits. The evening was crisp and cold, but clear, allowing everyone to enjoy the party in the wide-open spaces of their host's garden as well as in the huge drawing room inside that acted as a ballroom. The day after was All Souls and there would be fasting and praying and somberness. But not tonight.

Olivia laughed as Drew pulled her into a circle of dancers for yet another rambunctious country dance. He spun her wildly, making her cry out with girlish delight. She could feel the pins of her carefully styled hair coming loose, her hair slipping down her back. She raised a hand to her head in an attempt to hastily repair the damage, but Drew slapped it away playfully. "I like it this way so much better," he whispered before passing her onto her next partner.

Olivia danced with each man in the pattern, laughing and throwing herself into the music. Dancing like this was too much fun to do anything else. But always, her eyes strayed back to Drew. He smiled and

charmed each of the ladies. Self-assured and nimble on his feet, Drew had caught on to the dances immediately, and he was by far the best-looking man present. Of course, she admitted, she might a bit biased on that account.

But there was no arguing with the strong breadth of his shoulders, shoulders that had carried heavy baskets of grapes and olives up and down the rows with the rest of the guests present. There was no arguing with the friendly, masculine contours of his face that spoke of authority and confidence. Tonight, he was well turned out in his English finery for the ball, and he acted if he hadn't a care in the world, as if he weren't leaving her in the morning.

He caught her staring at him and gave her a playful wink. She shrugged her shoulders as if to say "Why not stare at the finest man in the room?" She pushed her negative thoughts away. They had tonight. She would not ruin it with worry over things she could not change.

The last rotation of the circle dance came and she was in his arms again, breaking away from the group in a galop, as the musicians spiraled into another lively tune. She tossed her head back with glee, feeling the last of her pins give way and her hair tumble free.

They danced until they were beyond breathless. Even then, Drew had not wanted to stop, but Olivia begged him, bribing him with *prosecco*, the sparkling Italian wine he loved.

They moved away from the heat of the ballroom to sip their drinks outside in the cool evening. Several people greeted them in passing. Olivia felt a sense of pride in the reaction Drew garnered from her neighbors. In the past month, the men had come to know him. Some had even come to call particularly on him and ask his advice about farming techniques. In a very short time, he'd become accepted socially. He was a man respected by other men. Of course, it went without saying that the women admired him too.

Outside, paper lanterns lit up the garden, adding to the festivities. Here the air was cooler and fewer couples thronged the pathways. Drew led her down a path towards a darker section of the garden. She smiled to herself. She was hungry for him, too.

But when they got to a secluded grove, hidden by high hedges, Drew made no move to kiss her. He sat down on a small bench, motioned her to sit and then promptly jumped up again.

His restlessness made Olivia nervous. She wished now that she'd found a way to go on dancing. Their talks had a habit recently of ending poorly.

"Liv, I've been thinking about something you said for the last couple of days," he began and Olivia cast about in her mind for a clue. There had been so much they'd said. What had he grabbed onto?

"You said sometimes we don't need reasons to do things." He blew out a breath. The air steamed at the effort.

“I think you may be right. I’ve been looking for reasons to stay, but ultimately I should decide for myself what I want. I should not wait for reasons to decide my happiness for me. Sometimes it’s reason enough simply to want something for myself.” He came to her and knelt in front of her, holding her agate gaze with his strong blue eyes. Olivia shivered, hardly daring to breathe. She had a good idea of what was coming next, but now that it had come, she didn’t know what would happen after that. What would she say?

“I want you, Olivia. I want you forever. Will you be my wife?”

She knew she had to answer him. She’d had plenty of time to play out her response should the moment come. She knew she should base her answer on love alone, but a thousand other questions rocketed through her brain. Was he expecting her to leave Italy and live with him in Vienna or wherever his career took him? Certainly it would mean living in England at some point. She could not ask those questions now without looking greedy and self-serving.

“Do you love me, Drew?” she asked softly? Wanting was different from loving, and she would not give up her home for mere want.

Drew reached inside his left coat pocket for a small velvet box and flipped open the lid. “I love you, Olivia.”

It was not the sapphire ring in the box, no doubt carefully crafted by the gemsmiths on the Ponte

Vecchio, which caused her to gasp. It was the sight of raw emotion in his eyes that undid her entirely. Her choice was made.

She threw herself into his arms, catching him off balance. They fell to the ground in a sprawl of limbs and skirts, laughter mixed with tears. Drew was peppering her face with kisses, and she knew she'd made the right choice, whatever details they had yet to work out. She would be a fool to ignore what this man offered her. He loved her beyond all reason and she would follow that drum wherever it led.

"If that's a yes, you should at least put the ring on." Drew teased, groping on the ground for the box which had fallen away during their embraces. He found it now and slipped the cool band of gold onto her finger.

Olivia held it up to catch the faint light of garden lanterns. "The stones are the color of your eyes."

"Sapphires are the color of fidelity." Drew reached for her hand. "There was a bishop of Rennes in the twelfth century, Marbodeus was his name. He wrote that the sapphire is an emblem of virtue, truth, and constancy. I pledge all those to you, and more, Olivia." He kissed her knuckles and Olivia knew that for the rest of her life, she would see that pledge mirrored in his blue eyes.

"I am overwhelmed," she whispered softly, moving into his embrace. "Do you think we could go home and celebrate properly?"

By the time they reached home, some of their initial giddiness had transmuted into a form of reverent, even exultant awe over the decision they'd made. In their bedchamber—she'd stopped thinking of it as her room long before—Drew came to her and undid the fastenings of her gown. The act had new meaning to her tonight; no longer was it fraught with a frenzied need to join together.

“Watch me, Drew,” she said softly, shoving him gently onto the bed. Certain of his attention, she lifted the thin chemise over her head, feeling her nipples harden at the contact with the colder air and the heat of Drew's gaze. She heard him draw a sharp breath. She smiled and bent slowly to the task of unrolling her stockings down the length of her legs, one by one, fully aware of the tantalizing view she provided him, heightening the desire that simmered between them.

Naked, she moved to the bed and tugged off his shoes. Next, she worked the fastenings of his shirt, stopping to caress the hard planes of his chest with her hands and tease his own nipples with her mouth. It would have been enough. Drew was taut with desire, each moment bringing his willpower closer to a breaking point. But Olivia was not done.

She pushed his trousers past his hips, freeing all of him to her gaze, to her body. At the touch of her hand on his member, Drew groaned in abject appreciation, his hand covering hers. She gently disengaged it. “Not yet, darling,” she whispered. Then she knelt between his thighs and took him full into her mouth, wanting to

show him in all ways that her love knew no limitations. He bucked hard, and she experienced a primal feminine thrill in knowing this man so intimately.

At the last, she allowed Drew to take her in a fierce roll that had her beneath him and him deep within. He drove into her hard, and she was ready to fly with him, their mutual satisfaction coming fast on the waves of his claiming thrust.

They were safe, Olivia thought. They were together in all things, in all ways. The fears of parting that had plagued their last days had been erased. She was his as he was hers, and the profundity of that thought lulled her to sleep in Drew's tight embrace.

Morning light warmed her face. Her first reaction was to reach for Drew. Her hand met with a cold pillow and sheets, indicating he'd been up for a while. Disappointment welled. She'd been hoping to pick up where they'd left off the night before.

"Are you awake, sleepyhead?" The familiar voice coaxed a smile from her. He was up early, but not far from her.

She opened her eyes and found him seated at her writing desk. Olivia brushed a loose strand of hair from her face. "What are you doing?"

"I'm writing the necessary letters." Andrew smiled, watching her rise from the bed and drape her discarded

cloak over her shoulders. “No sense in being modest now, my dear.”

“You can remove it later,” she promised. Taking up a spot over his shoulder, she scanned the letters. All playful teasing drained from her. “Drew, what are these?” She did not understand what she was reading. The content made no sense to her, she had assumed...

“My resignation from the diplomatic corps. I am not going back. My life is with you, and that life is here.”

Olivia found her way to the edge of the bed and sat down hard, digesting the news. “You’re sure? I had thought we would follow your career, wherever that led.”

“It leads here.” Drew said firmly, in a voice she’d come to recognize as the voice of authority. “I have no more desire to return to England than you do, Liv. I belong here.” Drew lifted another sheaf of papers from the writing table. “I have a modest fortune available to me, I do not come to you penniless, Liv. These papers will attest to my financial well-being. I can support you and our children in good fashion.”

Stunned, Olivia took the papers and looked through them. They mentioned income from a manor in England and a set of solid investments, along with an inheritance from a paternal aunt. He was indeed a well-set-up gentleman with enviable prospects. Her eye caught a listing on the last page and she smiled.

“What is this? A farm?” she queried.

“I have made arrangements to purchase back my grandparents' farm.” Andrew added his grin to hers. She knew what it meant to him to make that transaction. It was another way of fulfilling one of his long-ago promises. Her husband-to-be was a man of irreproachable honor.

“And the other letter?” She gestured to the last sheet of paper on the desk.

“To my friend St. Just, an invitation to my wedding.”

“*Our* wedding,” Olivia corrected. “Just a few days ago it seemed an impossibility.”

“Not impossible, my love,” Drew said, coming to the bed and laying her back. “Merely improbable. You will want for nothing.”

“How could I?” Olivia looked up into his handsome face, tanned by the hours of harvest work. “When I already have everything.”

Chapter X

The Viscount St. Just stood patiently beside a fidgeting Andrew Truesdale six weeks later in the San Lorenzo church. Beside the dark-haired St. Just stood Camden Mathison, tall and nearly as dark. “I’ve never you seen you so nervous, Andrew,” Camden jibed.

“You wait until it’s your turn,” Andrew responded tersely. “She should be here by now.” He fought the urge to check his pocket watch.

“She’ll be here,” St. Just said calmly. “She loves you more than you deserve.”

Andrew was glad for his friends’ arrivals. They’d held off the wedding for Cam to make the trip and St. Just worked it into his returning travel plans. The church was filled with new friends, friends of Olivia’s from town. He knew them, but it was not the same as having his old friends there as well. Only Julian Burke was absent, having married and returned to England earlier in the year. “Our numbers are getting smaller,” Andrew said wryly. “You’d better get married quickly, St. Just, or there won’t be anyone left to come to your wedding.” Cam laughed, but St. Just merely nodded his head at the nervous humor.

“I don’t think I’ll be next,” he said quietly. Privately, Andrew agreed. It had been St. Just in a roundabout way that had decided it for him. He and St. Just always had reasons for doing things, for their motivations. St. Just had told him once that he’d left England and sought work in the diplomatic corps, even though he held a title, because of some “very good reasons” about honor and duty. But his friend had never struck Andrew as a man who was truly happy. He’d known intuitively he’d end up like St. Just, if he didn’t strike out on his own and seize his destiny with Olivia.

The big wooden center doors of the church opened, and sunlight followed Olivia in, bathing her in an ethereal light. She’d chosen to wear a pale blue gown for the wedding, a chance to symbolize her own pledge of fidelity.

The gown hugged her tight at the waist and the bodice trimmed in crystal beads fitted snugly over breasts that Andrew intended to fully worship later that evening. Her dark hair hung down her back, loose beneath a fine white veil. No woman had ever looked finer to him, had ever promised him more than Olivia promised him in those moments she walked down the aisle to take his hand.

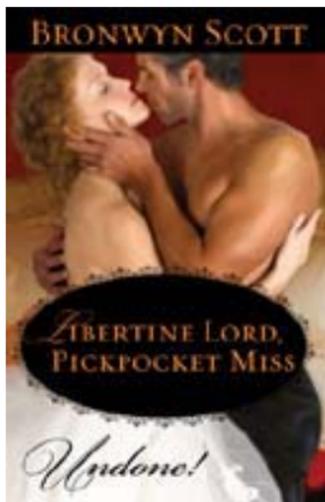
He squeezed her hand, noticing the betrothal sapphire sparkling there. He had almost let her get away. Never would he be that foolish again. He composed a short memo in his head.

*To the British Diplomatic Corps, Vienna,
Austria. Agent not returning. Mission
complete.*

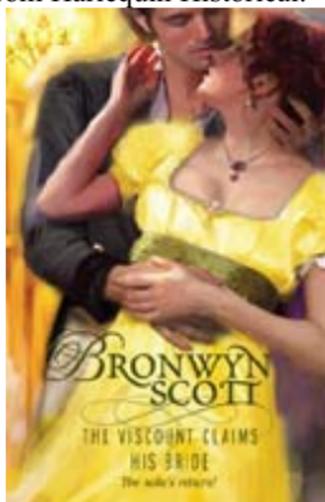
Drew smiled at his dazzling bride. Duty and honor was one thing, but love was another altogether.

* * *

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Bronwyn Scott is a communications instructor in the Puget Sound area, and is the proud mother of three wonderful children (one boy and two girls). When she's not teaching or writing, she enjoys playing the piano, traveling—especially to Florence, Italy—and studying history and foreign languages. You can learn more about Bronwyn at www.nikkipoppen.com

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Pleasured by the English Spy

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