



Melinda
Barron

*Compromising
Liaisons*

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By

Melinda Barron

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Resplendence Publishing, LLC
P.O. Box 992
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Compromising Liaisons
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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and occurrences are a product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, places, or occurrences, is purely coincidental.

Special thanks to Tiffany for all of her support, and to Leigh and Jess for all they do. Special thanks to CAS. Love ya, baby! This one is for historical lovers. I hope you enjoy this tale.

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Author's Note

For all the ways we think of them as prim and proper, many Victorians enjoyed reading erotica. They had tales in all different forms, including letters, poems, books and stories. A famous one of those, *The Pearl*, was published around 1880 in periodical form. I first discovered this collection of publications some time ago while looking through the stacks at a local bookstore. (Yes, I'm a bookstore hound and can be found in there quite a lot, spending afternoons browsing the shelves to see what is new, or what I have missed in the past.)

The Pearl intrigued me and I bought a copy and took it home. (I won't mention the look I got from the clerk, whose eyebrows shot up just a little. Okay, I mentioned it. Seeing his reaction was half the fun of buying the book.) The writing in these tales is not the cleanest I've ever seen, but the stories intrigued me. Most of them, anyway. Some of them mortified me, if you want the truth. But I read it the whole way through, then put it on my shelf.

Sometime last year I started thinking about it again, and wondered how it would figure into a story idea that had popped into my mind, about a prim, Victorian virgin who was about to wed, and didn't know anything about what would happen between herself and her husband. What would happen, I wondered, if she got her hands on a copy of *The Pearl*. That would certainly open her eyes. And what would happen to the lady who gave her the copy? And then after that, what would happen to the brother who had guarded the prim Lady so carefully, but was now looking for love of his own?

As I always do I discuss my ideas with two people; my editor, in this case Tiffany, and my friend Chet. Tiff fell for the idea immediately, and in her fantastic fashion helped me plan and sketch out the story. Over Chinese food I related my story idea to Chet. I remember the way his eyebrows shot up, much like the clerk in the bookstore all those years ago. Only Chet was not thinking, "Where did this come from," as I'm sure the clerk was as he examined my purchase.

Chet was thinking, and told me in no uncertain terms, “I want to read it when you’re done.” That was right before he asked to borrow my copy of *The Pearl*.

I hope you enjoy the tales of the three couples in *Compromising Liaisons*. These stories were so much fun to create. Their lives are all changed forever by reading *The Duke’s Mistress*, a collection of letters written by Anonymous in the late 1800s. In 2009, though, the letters were actually written by yours truly in what I hope is a good parody of Victorian erotica, and are included throughout this book. The letters do not speak of a love affair, but more of a sexual journey between two people. Please enjoy them and, as always, I welcome your comments at melinda.barron@gmail.com, or bast_writer@yahoo.com.

Cheers, and happy reading,

Mel

27 July, 1880

My dear _____,

It has been too long since our last visit. I hope things are well for you in the north. Here in London I have what can only be considered a new lease on life. I have become mistress to the Duke of _____. In an effort to protect him, should this letter be intercepted, I will only refer to him as His Grace. I am sure you understand my need for discretion.

Despite that need, though, I have a compelling desire to tell my story. And I know that you, dear cousin, will appreciate it in all its glory. Do you remember all those years ago when we discussed what happens between a man and woman? When I married I found we were far from the mark, as I am sure you did, also. My late husband was cold, and only coupled with me when necessary.

I can only thank the God above that no children came from that union, since he left me a widow so soon after our marriage. I cannot fathom how it would be to take care of a child on my own. But I digress, and you do not want to hear me complain about my lot in life. What you want is the details of His Grace, and those I shall give you.

I met him a scant month after my mourning period ended. He is a most handsome man, extremely tall with very broad shoulders. His dark hair is worn a little bit longer than the fashion, but it suits his rugged looks. He has yet to marry, and when he does I know it will not be to me. I am far below his station, but that has not kept him from making me his.

It was at a boring party for the Duchess of _____ that I first saw him. He was across the room, standing in a group of people. His gaze was focused on me and I felt as if I were on fire. It was almost as if he could see what I looked like in my shift. Perhaps it was my red hair that attracted him, I am not sure. All I know is that after a while it became warm in there. I went outside to the gardens and he was beside me in seconds, his hand on my back, propelling me toward the maze.

I did not speak, nor try to dissuade him. Once we were concealed from prying eyes he stopped me, pushing me back against the hedges. His hands found my breasts immediately, squeezing and exploring.

“Your Grace,” I said in shock, even though I did not try to move away. His touch was masterful and sent bolts of desire through my body. My last husband’s touch had never sent me on edge like this. The Duke’s hands explored me, moving from one mound to another before he stepped back.

“Lift your skirts.”

I did not even think of disobeying him. I gathered the material quickly, baring my pantalets to him. He tugged on them, exposing me to his view. He got down on his haunches, his hands now touching my pussy.

“Your cunt is wet.” I inhaled sharply as he touched me. “Do you wish to fuck, Melody?” (That is not my name, of course. His Grace used my real name. But I created Melody, in case this letter is ever found. Do you like it, my dear friend? It is quite fun to be able to name yourself. And I realize you are probably worried about me sending this salacious tale through the post to you. I have opted for a messenger service. And am delivering it to _____ inside another envelope, and asking him to pass it on to you. There will be no names on the missive you receive. If you believe the missives have been read please advise me of it and I will think of another way to deliver my letters to you. I suppose, though, that you want me to get back to the tale, and so I shall.)

“Yes.” I felt as if I could barely speak. He stood, his hands still stroking my folds.

“Yes to which question?” His smile was predatory and it made me want him inside me even more.

“Both, Your Grace.”

“Turn and bend over.” I obeyed immediately. He lifted my skirts over my hips as I grasped the bushes to keep myself steady. When I felt his prick rub against my backside I almost fled. He is much larger than _____, and I wondered what it would feel like inside me.

I soon found out, for he wasted no time in entering me, his prick sliding into my cunny, spreading me wide. He grasped my hips and fucked me silently, with the sounds of his flesh slapping against mine the only sounds in the night air. Well, that and his grunts. He took me

hard, and his climax was much longer in coming than _____'s ever was. It seemed to take forever, and the longer he thrust inside me the more the pressure, and pleasure, built.

"Touch your clit." The order shocked me and when I did not immediately respond he slapped my behind. "Do as I say. Stroke it, make yourself spend."

I was so aroused there was no way I could not obey. The hard nubbin responded to my touch immediately and when I climaxed he slapped my behind again, then left my body, spilling his seed over my backside.

He did not let go of my hips, though, holding me in place for a long moment that grew very uncomfortable. When he finally moved it was to wipe his kerchief across me, cleaning up his leavings. I righted myself on shaky legs and turned to him. His face was flush and the desire in his eyes had not abated.

"I will send herbs to your home, to prevent pregnancy so that I might spill inside you."

His words shocked me almost as much as what had just happened. He meant for us to couple again?

"Take them daily. I will visit you tomorrow." He was tucking his prick back into his breeches. "Wear nothing but your corset and stockings."

When I did not respond he narrowed his gaze at me. "Did you enjoy what we just did?"

"Very much, Your Grace."

"Good, then follow my directions. I will be there around one in the afternoon." He surprised me by tipping my face up and kissing me gently. Then he left. I righted my clothes, looking around and wondering if anyone had seen us, had watched our quick, hard coupling.

The experience left me frazzled, and back at the party I could barely make small talk with the other guests. I had arrived with _____, and you know how she can be. She immediately noticed my flush, and took it to mean something was wrong. That excuse was all she needed to whisk me from the affair and to my home where servants drew me a hot bath. I soaked for a long time, my cunny sore from its hard use tonight, a feeling it has not experienced since _____'s death.

Will I prepare myself for him tomorrow? I can almost see you shouting the question, dear friend. I can only say that yes, I will. And if this letter reaches you as it should, I will write to you of my next experience, if that is what you wish.

Take care, _____. I close this now so I can sleep and get it to the messenger in the morning. Please write to me soon for I miss you so.

*I remain your dear friend and cousin, and can now sign myself,
The Duke's Lover*

Part I
A Compromised Position

Chapter One

“He did not even try to kiss me.”

Margaret ran the brush through her charge’s hair. She waited for her to continue her laments, and then cleared her throat when the silence ensued. Usually the maid performed this chore, but Vesta had been in such a sullen frame of mind when she had left for her round of parties that evening that Mazie had waited up for her, to see if her mood had lightened, or if she was still feeling blue, which was obviously the case.

“Vesta, he is a Duke, and you will be his Duchess in a few short months. He shows you respect by not kissing you.”

“But I wanted him to kiss me.”

Despite her age of one and twenty, Vesta sounded like a spoiled child, and Margaret had half a mind to tell her so. Instead she continued to brush the curls that had taken more than an hour to create earlier that evening.

“Do you think he considers me an old maid? Maybe he regrets entering into our engagement.”

“Nonsense. His Grace is quite taken with you. I can see it in his eyes when you walk into a room.”

“All I see is a man who barely touches my elbow, or who takes my hand only long enough to brush his lips against my glove-covered skin. Is that what I am doomed to endure?”

Margaret placed the brush on the vanity, then knelt down next to the younger woman. “Tell me what is troubling you, and I do not mean just the missed kiss you were expecting. Something is bothering you very deeply.”

Vesta’s deep sigh made Margaret think the young woman would burst into tears. Instead she straightened her shoulders, then cut her gaze down. “Do you remember my friend Elizabeth?”

“Of course. She is with child, right? Barely a few months along.”

“Yes. She’s been married to the Duke of Beck for six months now. Earlier this week she relayed to me how horrible it was to lay with a man, how it hurts and is degrading. I wanted the Duke to kiss me so I could see if what she said was the truth.”

Margaret tried, and failed, to suppress a laugh. When Vesta glared at her, she put her hand in front of her mouth, clearing her throat and swallowing more laughter.

“I am sorry, little one. You wanted to judge how it is to take a man into your body by being kissed? There is quite a difference, and I can assure you it can be quite pleasurable, both the latter and the former.”

Vesta’s eyebrows shot up in surprise and Margaret laughed again. “You must take my word on this. Being with a man can bring great pleasure, and I believe the Duke of Waterford will be a masterful lover. Perhaps your friend is trying to frighten you.”

“Why would she do that?”

“Maybe because you are marrying a young, virile man, while she is married to a man almost her father’s age?”

Vesta giggled and Margaret stood, putting her hands on her hips. “Do you feel better now?”

“Yes, a little.” She gazed up, her eyes now full of mischief. “Tell me what it feels like.”

Margaret shook her head. “You will find out soon enough.

“Perhaps I should ask the Duke. Do you think it would shock him if I asked to see his manhood?”

This time Margaret’s laughter was loud, and she feared she would wake anyone who might be sleeping nearby. Images of her late husband flittered through her mind. He would love this conversation. Jonathan loved everything about sex.

“Yes, I think it would shock him. Although, if he is at all like my Jonathan, he might enjoy it. Jonathan was a passionate man, and he enjoyed playing games where carnal pleasure was concerned.”

“What sort of games?” Vesta stood, her eyes now full of wonder. “You must tell me.”

“No, it would not be proper. I have said too much as it is. It is time for the future Duchess of Waterford to go to bed.”

Vesta narrowed her gaze and pursed her lips. “I demand that you tell me.”

In response, Margaret laughed again. “A very good impression of an angry Duchess. But you are still just Lady Vesta Richmond right now, and I am your paid companion who can order you to bed. Now go.”

“I’d rather talk about being with a man. What does he look like...down there? Elizabeth said it was like a skinny sausage.”

Margaret put her hands in front of her mouth. “You really must stop or my laughter will wake the entire household. Go to bed.” To emphasize her command she walked to the bed, tossing back the heavy blankets. “Come along, you.”

“You are not that much older than I am, you know. Only eight years.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“You are ordering me to retire like a child. I want to talk. Please.” She put her hands together in a prayer gesture. “My mother is long dead and my father’s wife could care less about me, or my brother. Who will tell me what to do on my wedding night if you do not?”

“Your husband will instruct you in the art of lovemaking, just as mine did for me.” Margaret patted the mattress, smiling as Vesta crossed the room, taking off her robe as she walked. She sat with her back against the headboard.

Margaret placed the covers over Vesta’s lap and sat down next to her. “Do you want to know what my mother told me when I wed Jonathan?”

“Yes.” Vesta nodded vigorously and Margaret smiled.

“She said it was a wife’s duty to let her husband slake his lust on her body. She said it would be unpleasant, but that I would have to lie back and endure. Of course what she did not know was that Jonathan and I had already consummated our love, several times over, and that I enjoyed it very much.”

It was Margaret’s turn to giggle. “You are a naughty woman. It is a good thing my brother did not know of this when he brought you here.”

“Yes, and if he found out now he would put me on the streets. This information is meant for you and you alone.” Her heart beat just a little faster as she watched Vesta consider her words.

“Of course.” Vesta made an X over her heart to show she would keep the secret forever. “I am thrilled with this new knowledge. You must tell me everything. Please.”

The pleading tone in her voice made Margaret hesitate. She could understand Vesta's fears of the unknown, but by the same token, she knew she was placing herself in a very precarious position by discussing this issue with her charge. If Lord Melbrook, Vesta's older brother and Margaret's employer, found out, he would surely sack her.

Still, she felt a great affinity for the young woman whose mother had died so young and whose father was more interested in his young wife than in his two children. As soon as the engagement had been settled, the Marquess of Brightly had left for the continent, saying he would not be back until the day before his daughter's wedding. Calvin Richmond, the Earl of Melbrook and the future Marquess of Brightly, was more of a father to his sister than a brother, taking care of her every need and making sure she fared well before her wedding.

She could only imagine how Vesta felt, with no mother to give her even the untrue words Margaret's mother had whispered to her all those years ago. Losing one's virginity could be frightening, Margaret knew. She had not been frightened, but then she had Jonathan, a man she had loved, and trusted, with her whole heart.

Her body quivered at the thought of him, of his masterful hands stroking her, of his hard cock inside her. It had only been three years since his death, and yet, it felt like an eternity had passed, as if time had slowed to almost a stop without him in her life.

"Margaret." She turned as Vesta called her name. "Will you guide me?"

"I do not know, Vesta. You must give me a little while to think on this. I cannot tell you everything I know about what occurs between a husband and wife without first considering my thoughts."

Vesta's lips turned downward, but Margaret would not allow that to sway her. She needed to think, to reflect on the consequences of imparting information of a sexual nature to Vesta. The talks would be between the two of them, true, but some things had a way of becoming known to others, and if that happened...

"I will give you my decision on your request tomorrow."

Instead of pouting or trying to force the issue, Vesta nodded, something that surprised Margaret very much. She had expected her charge to pout until she got her way. Before she could do just that, Margaret stood and indicated Vesta should lay flat.

The younger woman snuggled under the covers and Margaret tucked her in, smiling as she backed away from the bed. "Sweet dreams, Vesta. And do not fret about your first encounter

with the Duke. You are worrying about something that can be quite beautiful, if you approach the situation in the right frame of mind.”

Before Vesta could respond, Margaret quickly made her way across the floor, disappearing behind the door that connected her room to Vesta’s. She shut the door softly and leaned against it, her heart beating quickly.

“Jonathan.” She put her hand over her heart and closed her eyes. “What should I do? I need you here to advise me.”

Soft moonlight filtered through a slot in the curtains and gave her enough light to cross the room. She lay down on her side, not bothering to take off her dress or shoes. The fire had not been banked and the room was chilly, but she didn’t get under the blankets, instead wrapping her arms around herself and closing her eyes as her thoughts pounded through her mind.

When she had taken the job as companion to the Marquess’ daughter, she had never thought to have a conversation such as the one that had just transpired. She was not sure what to tell Vesta. Despite her age, it was obvious no one had told her a thing about what took place between a husband and wife, except her friend Elizabeth, who had fed her a pack of lies.

What should Margaret tell her? Better yet, what right did she have to tell her anything at all? She was a companion, meant to keep the girl company on her outings. Vesta had few friends, and when she wished to go to the museum, or spend an afternoon in the park, Margaret always accompanied her. It was not hard work, and it kept her fed and clothed and out of the cold. If she spoke with Vesta about sexual intercourse and her brother found out...Margaret shivered to think what would happen. At the very least, a position in another household after Vesta was married would be out of the question.

“You will ruin the bedding, putting your shoes up there like that.” She opened her eyes to see Jonathan leaning against the bed poster, a smile lighting up his handsome face.

“You are right, of course.” She sat up, her fingers working the laces of her boots quickly. She let first one, then the other drop to the floor before placing her head back on the pillow.

“And your dress? Remember when I said I wanted to see you wearing absolutely nothing in bed? Have things changed so much in the three years I have been gone?”

“You were alive then. Now you are a figment of my overwrought imagination.” She looked back at him. “Unless you are a ghost.”

He shrugged and winked, and a lump formed in Margaret's throat. The apparition standing before her was the Jonathan she remembered, his dark hair cresting over his shoulders, his eyes alight with amusement. It was so different from the man Jonathan had become during the last few months of his life, when the sickness had taken hold of him.

"Have you come to advise me?"

"Were I able, I would do more than that." He sat on the bed and put his hand on her thigh. She could swear she felt the heat of his body, the warmth of his touch through her thick skirt.

"You think I should talk to her?"

"I think you should follow your heart, which will tell you not to let the young woman be fearful of something that can be so magnificent."

She nodded, inhaling sharply when his hand slid up her leg. She focused on him, frightened that if she closed her eyes to savor his touch he would disappear.

"Do you remember the first time we were together?"

"Oh yes, Jonathan. I remember it quite well." She shifted to her back, her hands cupping her breasts. Her nipples hardened against her shift and she moaned softly, wanting to feel Jonathan's fingers, and lips, on her tight buds. "You were so gentle, yet so masterful and strong. When I think of it and close my eyes, I can still feel you inside me, your hardness bringing us both to climax."

"And I can feel you, Margaret, so soft and sweet and willing. I remember your soft cry of pain when you gifted me with your maidenhead, and I remember the way you held me tight as the feeling passed into pleasure."

"Jonathan." Hot tears broke free from her eyes and snaked down the sides of her face, wetting her hair.

"Do not cry for our loss, my love. Instead use your knowledge to help your new charge have a chance at the happiness we shared. Teach her to be open and honest with her new husband, as we were with each other. Help her not to be afraid."

"You are right, of course." She wiped tears away and sat up. "It is best to talk with each other and to be honest."

A dark cloud seemed to pass over his face and she sniffled. "What is wrong?"

"Tell me why you have broken your vow to me."

Pain seized her at his words. She didn't have to ask what he meant. "Jonathan, I..."

"You promised me you would not die with me, do you remember? I asked you to take another husband and you agreed. Yet you have closed yourself off from life, doing nothing more than playing nursemaid to young, rich women."

"I have to have money to live, and my choices are limited." She didn't want her words to seem accusing, and prayed he didn't see it that way. The look on his face told her he did not.

"You are right, of course, and I am sorry that I did not provide better for you. That is my shame."

"No, I do not blame you. You did not want to die."

"No, I did not. I wanted to stay with you forever." He caressed her thigh and she sighed again. "But sometimes we do not get everything in life. Things will change, though, and you must again give me your word. Allow yourself to love again, Margaret. Promise me."

She glanced at him and gasped. In the thin strip of moonlight, he looked almost transparent. Was this really Jonathan, her love? Or was it a figment of her imagination, as she feared?

"Promise me. It pains me to see you alone."

"I promise, Jonathan." Even as she said the words, she knew there was little chance for her to keep the promise. After Vesta married, she would have to find another position. She had little time to try and find herself a husband.

"I don't know what to say to her," Margaret said softly. "You knew so much, and I treasured every word."

"You know those same things now, my love."

"Yes, but how do I tell her what to expect? It is different for me to talk to another woman."

"Perhaps you could show her." His gaze drifted toward the trunk in the corner of the room and Margaret followed its path. She knew exactly what he was talking about. It had been years since she had looked at the items in the trunk. When she had packed up their belongings, she had considered throwing them on the rubbish fire. But her hands had stilled before she could toss them into the flames. They represented too many wonderful memories of her time with Jonathan.

She nodded at the trunk. “You are right of course, I...” she turned back to the where Jonathan had stood, only to find an empty space.

Tears flooded her eyes again as she lay back down and hugged a pillow, her mind wishing it would magically transform into her husband so he could hold her close the night through. He had provided her with the answer she sought, and she would follow his advice. About everything. She loved Jonathan with all her heart, but he was right. It was time for her to live again. Now all she had to do was find someone to help her keep her promise to him.

Chapter Two

Vesta took a small sip from her cup, then set it back on her saucer gently, just as she'd been taught all those years ago. Ladies did not clink their cups on the saucer. It was her job to make sure the cup made no noise as it settled, but she wanted it to make noise. She wanted to slam it down and watch the china break, to see the pieces fall to the floor.

That might liven up this little tea party. As it was progressing now, Vesta feared she would die of boredom. All the ladies were talking about the Countess of Leads' latest gown, which she had proudly displayed at her party last night. They were discussing the seamstress and how it now took months to get a frock from her, since she'd been inundated this morning with people wanting the style of gown like the one the Duchess had worn.

She did not want to be here this afternoon. What she really wanted was to be at home, discussing carnal issues with Margaret—if her companion had made the decision to give her information.

Vesta had wanted to talk with her at breakfast this morning, but Calvin had been there, which was unusual for her brother. Usually he slept until noon. Why he'd been up at ten o'clock was a mystery to her.

Then he had turned to Margaret and told her to take the afternoon off, something that had astonished the older woman. Vesta could tell that by the look on her face. But Margaret had nodded, and then left the table after finishing her food. Her departure meant Vesta did not have the chance to ask her to continue the conversation they had started last night.

Calvin had further shocked Vesta by taking her riding at noon, the outing ending at the home of given by Lady Beatrice Morset, a woman she knew he admired and wanted to initiate a relationship with. Lady Morset was a widow, and it crossed Vesta's mind as she glanced at her brother, sitting across the room talking to the few men who were here, that perhaps the Lady and her brother already had a relationship. Maybe they were lovers and he was using Vesta as an excuse to be near her.

She wondered how she would find out if that were true, then realized the lady in question was speaking to her.

“I’m sorry, my mind is aflutter today.” Vesta laughed softly. “Could you repeat that?”

“I asked how the plans are progressing for your marriage to the Duke of Waterford. He’s quite a handsome man.”

“Things are going quite well, thank you for inquiring.”

She brought her teacup back up to her mouth as Lady Willa, sitting next to her, broke into a story about how her mother had fixed her eye on the Earl of Stansmere as her daughter’s future husband. The ladies tittered about making perfect matches and Vesta tried not to groan, or lean her head back and shout for Calvin to “wake her when it was over.”

Good Lord she was bored. Something had to give or she would lose her mind before her twenty-second birthday. She wondered what Margaret was doing today. It seemed as if the only time Vesta laughed anymore was when she was spending time with her companion. Margaret had an air about her that put people at ease, and she seemed to enjoy her life, even though she had lost the man she loved.

How did one live through that experience and still smile? Maybe she should ask Margaret if there was a secret to being happy. She decided she would ask, right after she finished getting information about sex. She lifted her cup and cast a furtive glance at Lady Morset, who was looking coyly in her brother’s direction. Maybe she was interested in him as well. If they were having a relationship did she enjoy being bedded? She must if she was engaging in such activities outside the marriage bed.

The way Elizabeth spoke about “the act” she would do it only when forced to fulfill her wifely obligations. Why would one woman think it was horrible and the other think it was fine? Vesta sighed, and then realized the noise had caught the attention of their hostess.

“Lady Vesta, are you unwell? Would you like to find a quiet place to rest your eyes?”

“A good idea. I noticed earlier that you looked a little peaked.”

When had Calvin come up behind her? He put his hand on her shoulder and Vesta frowned. She didn’t look peaked, did she? “I am just fi…”

But Lady Morset was already on her feet, ringing for a maid. “Take Lady Vesta to the salon, and bring her a cold compress for her eyes.”

Calvin helped her to her feet and the ladies all exclaimed about how pale she looked.

“There’s nothing wrong,” she whispered to her brother as he led her toward the door. “If you think I’m pale, then take me home.” *Please, take me home.*

“You should rest first.”

When they entered the salon, the maid indicated the fainting couch, then curtsied and hurried from the room. She was back seconds later with a cold cloth. Vesta thought about arguing, then decided sitting that down in this room by herself would still be a great improvement over listening to the ladies talk about husband hunting.

She sat on the couch and put her feet up, then closed her eyes as the maid placed the cloth on her face. It felt cool and refreshing.

Her mind drifted over last night’s conversation with Margaret, and she wondered how she would raise the subject again without being embarrassed. Maybe tonight, after she returned from attending the theater with the Duke, she would ask Margaret once again about what it was like to be with a man. Perhaps Margaret had decided to tell her what she wanted to know. Maybe by this time tomorrow, she would be a wiser woman in the ways of love.

She rested against the supple cushion, allowing her mind to wander. The couch was soft, and the silence relaxing. She once again wished they would just go home so she could speak with Margaret. Her eyes grew heavy and she felt the pull of sleep.

Maybe just a few seconds of slumber would help the time pass until she was in her own home...

* * * *

Vesta’s eyes popped open and she sat up, the cloth falling into her lap. It took her a few moments to gain her bearings. Then she remembered she was in Lady Morset’s salon. A glance at the clock showed she had been in here for at least half an hour, if not longer.

She stood slowly, her mind going back to her brother’s insistence that she come in here and “rest,” even when there was nothing wrong with her. She folded the cloth carefully, setting it on the floor next to the couch, then smoothed her hands over her dress.

As she stepped into the hallway, she realized there were no sounds coming from the drawing room where they had taken tea. She opened the door, peaking in to see who had not yet left, and was surprised to find her brother sitting next to Lady Morset. He had one of her curls wrapped around his finger, twirling it slowly as they talked. Their voices were so low Vesta could not make out their words.

Calvin leaned in and placed his lips on Lady Morset's, and Vesta gasped, quickly putting her hand over her mouth.

One of his hands stayed in her hair, holding her head close to his. The other moved to cup one breast. She heard the sound of their lips pulling apart, heard Lady Morset's soft murmur of approval as Calvin fondled her breast, his touch bolder than it had been just seconds before.

Vesta slid back into the hallway, her heart beating quickly. It was wrong of her to watch, and she knew she should make her presence known somehow. Yet, she hated the thought of breaking up their little tryst, and the fact that Lady Morset was obviously her brother's mistress didn't really bother her. After all, things like that happened all the time.

What caught her attention was the Lady's obvious approval of the feel of Calvin's hand on her intimate parts. She had not expected that, given what Elizabeth had told her about how horrid the experience was. She definitely needed to talk with Margaret.

Vesta hurried back to the salon, then opened and closed the door nosily, praying the sound carried into the drawing room. She was still a few feet away from the salon's door when it opened and Calvin came outside.

"Feeling better?"

"Yes." She peeked over his shoulder to where Lady Morset stood, her cheeks flushed. Vesta looked back at her brother, seeing him for the first time as a woman might look at him. He was handsome enough she supposed, with dark hair and eyes, and he had a good disposition, rarely showing a temper.

He would make someone, especially a widow like Lady Morset, a good husband. Was that what they were working toward, or was this merely a casual relationship? She could not exactly come out and ask him.

"Vesta?" The concern in his voice made her smile.

"I should be getting home. I have to prepare for the theater tonight."

"Of course." Calvin said, nodding. "If you collect your coat and reticule, I will meet you at the doorway in a moment."

She nodded to him then turned to their hostess. "Thank you, Lady Morset, for your hospitality this afternoon."

"You are quite welcome, Lady Vesta. Please return any time."

Oh I shall. And hopefully next time I will be better informed about your relationship with my brother.

* * * *

Margaret sat in the chair, the time worn pieces of paper resting on her lap. She wanted to be careful with the sheets, as they held so many pleasant memories for her, memories of her husband and the wonderful times they shared reading and laughing, then playing, together.

Vesta had already left for the theater by the time Margaret returned from the museum. She loved the museum, and on her hours off, she spent quite a bit of time there looking over the exhibits and talking with the curators. It always left her feeling happy and fulfilled. She had also taken advantage of her rare afternoon off by going to a teashop after her museum visit. A light repast of sandwiches and tea had filled her belly while she'd read a pamphlet on Egypt, the latest one the museum offered.

It would be thrilling to visit such place, and to see those ancient sites with her own eyes. But with her meager resources, that would never happen, she knew. When she had returned home, she had been surprised to find Vesta already gone. Obviously she had sat longer in the teashop than she had thought.

Now she waited, ready to provide some answers for her young charge about what happened between a man and a woman. She did not plan on Vesta reading the papers on her lap, but they reminded Margaret of her time with Jonathan, and how they had used *The Duke's Mistress* for their own satisfaction.

She leafed through the publication slowly, then stood and placed the papers in her trunk. Just as she closed the lid, the maid opened the door between Margaret and Vesta's room.

"She has returned and asked that you attend her tonight." The obvious relief in the maid's tired voice made Margaret smile.

"Thank you, Carolyn. I will see she is readied for sleep."

The maid nodded and quickly exited the room. Margaret went through the open doorway to find Vesta already taking the pins from her hair.

"Did you enjoy yourself tonight?"

"Not in the least." Vesta turned to her. "I saw Calvin kissing Lady Morset today, and it only increased my desire for the Duke to kiss me. Of course, he never made so much as a small move toward me."

“You spied on your brother?”

“No.”

Margaret listened as Vesta explained the situation. A little heat rose in the younger woman’s cheeks as she talked, and Margaret smiled.

“He has a mistress,” Vesta said, shaking her head. “It surprises me.”

“One kiss does not mean she is his mistress,” Margaret replied. “Although I admit his touching her breast is more than a small caress.”

“She seemed to enjoy it.”

Margaret finished taking the pins from Vesta’s hair, then put her hand on the younger woman’s shoulder. “Being with a man can be quite pleasurable, Vesta. If you go into the situation with the mindset that it will be unpleasant, than it will be so. You need to open yourself to the possibility of feeling joy from being with your husband. You will be nervous the first time, yes, but I cannot imagine the Duke would be anything less than gentle with you.”

“Does it hurt?”

Vesta’s question made Margaret cringe a little, but she would not lie. “When Jonathan took my maidenhead there was a little pain, yes, and there was some blood. But after that first time there was nothing but pleasure.”

The look on Vesta’s face was mixed with fear and excitement and Margaret laughed. “It is a most natural thing that has been made unnatural by people saying a woman should not feel pleasure. If she enjoys it, she is a whore, they say. That is simply not true. My Jonathan wanted me to feel complete satisfaction from our lovemaking, and I’m sure there are quite a few men who do.”

“Satisfaction? What does that mean?”

Margaret sighed heavily. *In for a penny, in for a pound.* She had started the conversation and now she needed to finish it.

“When a man spills his seed he feels intense pleasure. The term for it is an orgasm. With the proper stimulation a woman can feel that same pleasure. But if you are tense, it will not happen. You must relax and allow yourself to experience it fully.”

Vesta stood and quickly moved to the couch that sat near her bed. “Come and sit with me. I want to hear about this...stimulation.”

Margaret stayed in place. “I am talking about a man caressing you softly. When he touches you, you will feel pressure in your quim, in the center. It will build to a peak when he touches you there, stroking the button that can make you soar as he does.”

“Really?” The frightened tone of Vesta’s voice had been replaced by awe. “Your husband did this for you? Can you show me how?”

“No, I will not show you how. That is up to your husband.”

Vesta pouted and Margaret wondered what the next question would bring. She did not have long to wait.

“Describe it for me, then.”

Margaret thought about it for a few moments, then crossed the room and sat down next to her young friend. “When Jonathan was inside me, it was the most intense fulfillment I have ever known. His kiss, his caress, warmed my body and my soul. My nipples would harden and my passage would become moist to ease his entry. It was loving, and beautiful. I consider myself very lucky to have found a man that loved me as much as I loved him.”

“Last night you talked about games. What did you mean by that?”

Margaret’s stomach did a flip, and she clasped her hands in front of her. “I am afraid I spoke out of turn. It is not something I should discuss with you.”

“Please.”

Margaret considered the request, finally deciding to continue the discussion.

“We would read *The Duke’s Mistress* together. Sometimes we would act out scenes from it, or he would have me write something for him. He called them our erotic adventures.”

“*The Duke’s Mistress*? What is that?”

“You truly are an innocent, and if I tell you this, I will ruin you. Your future husband would be shocked when he discovered you have such knowledge, and your brother will likely have me sent to Newgate on some charge or another.”

Vesta stood and wandered toward her bed. “Very well, I will ask Lady Morset the next time I see her. Do you think she knows?”

Fear gripped Margaret at the thought of Vesta mentioning *The Duke’s Mistress* to anyone else. She had no doubt Lady Morset knew, and she had no doubt that if she were Lord Melbrook’s lover, she would tell him immediately about what his sister has asked. Since Vesta had few other friends, it would not be difficult to figure out where she had learned of the pages.

“*The Duke’s Mistress* is an erotic story, or rather, a collection of letters about a woman’s adventures as a Duke’s mistress. Do not ask me who wrote it because I do not know. It was released in installments, which Jonathan procured for us. I have not acquired a new chapter since Jonathan died, and I have no idea how he found the ones he brought to our home. The letters feature a widow who becomes mistress to the man who owns her property.”

Vesta’s eyes were now wide with amazement. “Do you still have it? Let me see.”

“I have the copy that Jonathan brought me, yes. We would read them together. When we discovered how much we both enjoyed reading the story, I would write tales for him. But I will not share them with you. I am sorry.”

Vesta cocked her head and Margaret could tell her charge was thinking of a way to lay her hands on Margaret’s copy of *The Duke’s Mistress*.

“The stories I wrote are intensely personal. You must understand that, Vesta.”

“Yes, but the others were for public consumption. And I am part of the public, am I not?”

“You are.” Margaret could see almost immediately she was going to lose this argument. “But, as I said, they are highly erotic and your husband should make the decision about whether or not you should read them. Not me.”

“Nonsense. You tell me not to be fearful of what will happen with my husband, and then you turn me down when I ask to see something that will help ease my fears.”

Margaret pondered her next words, so as not to speak too harshly. “*The Duke’s Mistress* is not about lovemaking, it is about erotic sex. There is a difference.”

“Then let me learn about erotic sex.”

The expectant look on Vesta’s face made Margaret smile. She thought back to her first time with Jonathan. They were not yet married and her mother had not said a word to her about what happens between a man and a woman. She left that for her wedding night, when it was too late.

That wouldn’t be the case with Vesta. Margaret could not see the Duke of Waterford seeking carnal relations with Vesta before the wedding. The only relation available to tell Vesta what to expect was her father’s wife, who made no secret of the fact she wanted nothing to do with her stepchildren.

What harm would it do to let Vesta look at *The Duke’s Mistress*? If she understood the writings were fiction and not a guideline about relations with her husband, then it would be fine.

It would give her some idea of what happened, physically, without Margaret going into too much detail that might embarrass the both of them. And if it could ease Vesta's fears even a little, it would be worth the risk of letting her see the pages.

"You must know it is fiction. You cannot expect this type of thing from your husband."

Vesta nodded, her eyes gleaming with anticipation. "Will you let me read the tale?"

"Yes, I will. It was done in parts, as I said, and I am afraid the last chapter that I have leaves you wondering what happens next. I have five segments, and have no idea how many there were."

"How wonderful your relationship with your husband must have been for you to enjoy this together. I cannot image Elizabeth doing so with her Duke."

Tears burned the back of Margaret's eyes at the memory of the evenings Jonathan would come home with a new installment from *The Duke's Mistress*. They would eat dinner, with the pages placed near them on the table, as if to remind them of what was to come. Then, after they had cleaned and stocked wood for the night, they would sit by the fire and he would read to her. By the time he reached the end of the letter they would both be aroused, and the evening's lovemaking would leave them both panting for breath, and anxious for more.

"May I have them tonight?"

Margaret felt as if she were giving away a part of Jonathan. *The Duke's Mistress* was their secret, something they enjoyed together. But somehow she didn't think Jonathan would mind. Wasn't that the purpose of the dream she'd had the other evening?

"Yes, you may have them. Wait here and I will fetch them."

She went into her room, opening her trunk and carefully separating the two ribbon-wrapped stacks of paper, one with *The Duke's Mistress* and the other with the few tales she'd done for Jonathan before he'd become ill. She put her stack of papers back in the trunk and returned to Vesta's room with her copy of *The Duke's Mistress*, hoping it would answer some of her young charge's questions.

Chapter Three

Vesta squeezed her eyes shut when the maid opened the curtains in her room. She wanted to snap at the girl to close them, then realized how rude that would sound. It would not be fair to punish the staff for her own lack of sleep.

“What time is it?” She blinked rapidly, trying to adjust to the sudden sunlight.

“It is just before eleven, Lady Vesta. The Duke of Waterford will be here at two o’clock for your riding engagement. Margaret said to wake you now, so you can bathe and prepare for his arrival.”

“Of course.” Vesta clamped her mouth shut to keep from saying what she really thought: that she had no desire to ride with the Duke. She wanted to stay in bed and reread *The Duke’s Mistress*, to see if the second reading provided that fluttering between her thighs. It had been a wonderful sensation, one she hoped to feel again. Soon.

Thinking of the pages she had read made her sit up and glance down at the bed. The papers were not there, and she felt a moment’s panic that quickly subsided. She had placed them in the bedside drawer before she had fallen asleep. If the maid found them, and turned them over to Calvin, things would go badly for both her and Margaret.

Still, she had to remember to thank her companion for opening her eyes to erotic writing. It was enlightening and very entertaining. She wondered again, as she had done last night, where she could find more of the writings, and where she could lay her hands on the remaining chapters of *The Duke’s Mistress*. She wanted to see what happened next.

The fictional Duke, who did not have a name, was very handsome, and Vesta was sure the description of him, and of his manhood, was responsible for the fluttering between her legs as she read the passages. She wondered what his manhood, or his “prick” as he called it, really looked like.

She thought about his words as he and the Mistress had played. “*Would you like to suck my prick?*” Yes, the tingling had started with those words, and produced the wetness spoken of

by Margaret, and the fictional Mistress, too. Margaret had warned the stories were erotic, but Vesta was not really prepared for the feelings they had produced.

She did not get those sorts of sensations when she thought about the Duke. He was a handsome man, true, but she had never thought of him as a lover without being frightened of what would happen. Until now.

She wondered if he would call her quim a *cunt*, or a *cunny*, as the Duke had done for his Mistress. “*Show me your cunny, touch it, get yourself wet and ready for my prick.*”

Vesta moaned softly as she recalled the Duke’s words. She had been tempted to touch herself much as the Mistress touched herself while the Duke watched. But that would be wrong, she knew. The stories were fictional, not real.

“Milady, do you feel well?”

“What? Yes, Carolyn, I am fine. Please, fetch some water up for a bath.”

“Yes, milady.” Sharon curtsied and left.

Vesta pressed her thighs together, hoping the movement would ease the pressure building inside her core. But it did not. The tight little bud the Duke called a *clit* throbbed. Could Vesta do what the Mistress had done? Could she play with the bud until she “spent?”

It was a sinfully wicked idea, and although it appealed to her, the thought still frightened her. She was not sure she would be able to do it and not feel complete embarrassment and shame. Reading the stories was fascinating, yes, but touching herself like that was not something she was quite prepared for.

The stories had been quite...educational, though, and she felt much better prepared for what would happen between herself and the Duke when she married. Would he want her to call him “Your Grace” or would he allow her to call him by his Christian name, Sterling? She had only known him for a few months and things had been very formal. Would that end soon, or would it continue?

She knew Elizabeth referred to her husband as Your Grace and never once called him by his given name. In fact, Vesta was not sure she knew the Earl of Becklea’s given name.

The door opened and Sharon came back inside, followed by two other maids hauling buckets of water. Vesta knew she had to get up, take a bath and prepare for her afternoon with the Duke. Spending time with him was not that bad, really. He was very pleasant to look at, with his broad shoulders and his ginger hair. She wondered what his manhood looked like, if it would

be as the fictional Duke's was, long and thick. Thinking of it made Vesta's insides flutter again. She wanted to talk to Margaret, to see if this was what happened in real life as well as in fiction, or if something was wrong with her.

"Carolyn, is Margaret in her room, or is she downstairs?" It was amazing to her how much she had come to rely on Margaret's company. When Calvin had told her he had acquired a companion, she had been furious. She had argued she was too old for a companion, but he had insisted, saying she did not have enough friends in London to accompany her places and she could not go on her own.

That information had been correct. Her only true friend was Elizabeth, who would soon be packed off to the countryside while she awaited the birth of her child. Margaret's company allowed Vesta to go to museums and matinee performances. Plus, she was a good friend, and was fun to talk to and learn things from, like today.

"I believe she is downstairs, milady, in the library."

"Good. Ask her to wait for me down there."

Carolyn nodded, then left the room. The other maids filled the tub and helped Vesta to make quick work of her bathing. She wore a dark blue day dress that would be perfect for the open carriage the Duke was sure to bring for their ride.

She found Margaret in the drawing room, a book on her lap.

"What are you reading?"

"An adventure story written by Mr. Haggard. They are so much fun."

Vesta sat down on the couch next to her, her smile lighting her face. "Well, I think I read a much more adventurous story last night."

"I take it you read *The Duke's Mistress*?"

"I did, all of it, and I have some questions." She fixed her eyes on Margaret. "Do you play with your clit to relieve the pressure you sometimes feel?"

She could tell by the look on Margaret's face that the question shocked her. Something in her companion's eyes told her she did perform the act Vesta had just asked about, and was trying to decide whether to tell the truth, or lie.

"Is there a specific way it has to be done?"

"Vesta, I do not think..."

"Is there? Or is it according to what the woman likes?"

She focused her gaze on Margaret's face and could see once again that Margaret might not answer the question. Finally, after a few long moments, the older woman sighed and put down her book.

"It is according to what you like, Vesta, or so Jonathan told me. He was more experienced than I when we married, since he had been my only lover."

"Hum." Vesta ran her hands down her legs. "Did it bother you, the fact that he had lain with other women?"

"No. Our love for each other was very strong. I could not fault him for things he did before he met me."

"I see. I am sure the Duke has lain with many women." For some reason that thought bothered her. She wasn't as forgiving as Margaret was about it. But maybe it was because she and the Duke did not love each other. "I have a few more questions. Will you answer them for me, before Sterling arrives for our afternoon engagement?"

"Of course. I see no reason not to, since I've already given you the story and you have read it."

"Good. Let us go into the dining room, then, so I can eat something before we depart. And when the Duke and I return, I hope you and I can take a walk to continue our conversation."

"You must have quite a bit to ask, Vesta."

"I do indeed. Quite a bit."

* * * *

"I just do not understand why you do not marry the woman. She is respectable, and quite attractive."

Calvin nodded, then blew out a heavy breath. "She is indeed, Ethan, but for some reason, she is not willing to marry at this time. She thinks if she marries me now, when her mourning period has been over for such a short time, people will think we began our relationship during that period."

"And they would be right," Ethan replied with a laugh. "You were in her bed a scant four months after her husband died. Everyone knows it. But who cares, Calvin? You and Lady Morset are both young and should have a long life together. You can produce many sons and thumb your nose at society."

“After my sister is wed. I want no taint of scandal around our family before she and Waterford are married. I count my blessings every day that he offered for her hand.”

“What man would not offer for her? She is stunningly beautiful and intelligent to boot. If I were in line for more than what a second son gets, I might have offered for her myself.”

Calvin turned to Ethan Cromwell, his best friend since childhood. “No, you would not. You might admire her, but you do not feel about her the way a man feels about his wife. She is like a sister to you, and that would prove awkward.”

“True.” Ethan nodded and Calvin laughed.

“You will find a woman soon enough. I have no doubt of it. Come along. I think she and her companion are in the dining room. Vesta was abed far too late this morning and I would like to speak with them about it. She needs to start behaving like a Duchess, one who will run a household and not spend all morning sleeping.”

He put his hand on the dining room doorknob then stopped, his brow furrowing in shock as voices drifted from the room. The voices were low, but he could swear he heard Vesta use the word *cunt*.

Shock ran through his system as he listened, hearing the word Duke, and then yes, cunt, again.

“What is it?” Ethan stepped closer to the door and Calvin held up his hand, urging him to stay in place. The word he heard this time was *prick*.

Rage surged through him and he let go of the door handle as if it were on fire.

“Oh my,” Ethan said with a quiet chuckle. “Something tells me young Vesta has been busy of late, and not in a ladylike manner.”

Calvin’s breathing grew rapid as it became apparent what they were speaking about: sex, specifically pleasuring themselves.

“Wait, listen. Did you hear that?” Ethan leaned closer. “She mentioned *The Duke’s Mistress*. How would Vesta know about that salacious novel?”

“Obviously from her companion.” Calvin ran his fingers through his hair, working hard to keep his anger under control. He wanted to go into the room and throttle his sister, right after he dismissed the woman sitting next to her.

“Do not do it.” Calvin tried to shrug off the hand Ethan put on his shoulder. “Listen to me, Calvin. Think about this before you go in there. I understand your anger, but you need to consider the situation first.”

“What is to consider, Ethan? You heard them as well as I did.”

“Yes, I did, but Vesta has always been a little on the stubborn side. If you go into the room yelling and making accusations, it will get you nowhere.” Ethan stepped in front of him.

The ladies were still talking in the room, their voices low. He caught little snippets from time to time. Now they were discussing riding with Waterford this afternoon.

“Waterford. Good Lord, if he hears about this, he will break the engagement and Vesta will never find a suitable husband. Something has to be done.”

But Calvin knew Ethan was right. If he went in there with no proof, only the accusation that he had overheard the discussion, Vesta would deny it, and the conversation would do nothing but anger the both of them. He needed something solid to show to her, something to prove to her that he knew what she was up to, and he would not stand for it. And something he could use to get the horrible Mrs. Compton out of his home.

He pushed past Ethan and headed for the stairs, taking them two at a time, his friend hot on his heels.

“What are you doing?”

“I am going to search my sister’s room, see what I can find.”

“Calvin, stop.” Ethan tried to grab him, but Calvin again shrugged him off. “Think about this. You will be doing yourself no favors if you confront her now.”

Calvin stopped right outside the door and turned to Ethan. “You think I should just let it go? You think I should let that woman turn my sister into a whore?”

“I do not think that is what is happening.” Ethan pinned him with a serious gaze. “I think Vesta is close to marrying and is curious about what will happen between herself and Waterford. Her companion is the closest woman she has to discuss these things. Would you rather she came to you and asked questions?”

“There is a difference, Ethan, between discussing marital relations and using words such as cunt and prick. I would know if she has my sister reading *The Duke’s Mistress*.” Without waiting for a reply, he went into Vesta’s room, shocking the maid who was making up the bed.

“Leave now.”

She curtsied and practically ran from the room.

Ethan leaned against the doorjamb, his arms crossed over his chest. “When this ends badly, I pray you remember that I tried to warn you.”

Calvin took in the large bed and nightstand, then cast a gaze to the desk. He crossed to it, opening each drawer and finding nothing more than novels, quills, ink and writing paper. There was a journal that, when opened, revealed Vesta’s handwriting. He closed it quickly, not wanting to invade his sister’s private thoughts to that extent.

When his search turned up nothing else, he cast his gaze back to the bed table, crossing the room quickly and opening the drawer.

“Oh.” He leaned over and picked up the pamphlets, his heart rate quickening more. “She did not even bother to hide it very well.”

“Probably because she expected no one to invade her privacy.”

Calvin turned an angry gaze on Ethan. “You are taking her side?”

“I am saying you need to look at this logically instead of flying into a rage. Sit Vesta down and talk to her. Do not scream, and whatever you do, do not call her a whore.” Ethan took a step into the room. “Thank about it, Calvin. A woman is told nothing about sex, and a well-bred woman such as Vesta is expected to go to her marriage bed an ignorant virgin. That is not Vesta, and you know it. She is too inquisitive for that.”

“It does not mean she needs to learn things from *The Duke’s Mistress*.” Calvin shook the pages at him.

“I will agree with you there,” Ethan replied. “But please talk with her before you do anything rash.”

Calvin took a deep breath, hoping it would calm him. It did, somewhat. But he still felt anger at what was happening. “I will have to discharge Mrs. Compton.”

“Pity,” Ethan said. “She’s a comely woman, and very intelligent, if you ask me.”

“Maybe too intelligent.” Calvin looked at the papers in his hand, then squared his shoulders. “It has to be done, Ethan. We can argue all night about how nice it would be for a woman to go to her wedding bed knowing about sex. But what happens when Waterford thinks my sister a whore and files for an annulment the next day?”

“You are right, of course. I’m not saying what Mrs. Compton did was right. But you have to consider Vesta in all this. Do not make it seem as if sex is a horrible thing. That may scar her

for life. Talk to her about the way she went about learning; that is what you should focus on. And Mrs. Compton should have known better.”

Calvin knew he was right. After all, did he not himself appreciate the fact that Beatrice was a woman of the world, and that she had shared her favors with him? And he still planned on marrying her, when the time was right. But he had no idea how Waterford would react if his new wife asked to see his prick on their wedding night.

“Let us go downstairs,” Calvin said. “I am calm now, and I think you for your counsel. It is time, though, to deal with this situation before Waterford arrives for his afternoon riding engagement.”

They took the stairs down at a much more sedate pace. Calvin paused outside the dining room door, then pushed it open only to find the room empty. A maid stacking dishes acknowledged his presence, then continued her work.

“Where is my sister?”

“I do not know, milord.” She shook her head slightly.

“Milord.” Calvin turned to find the butler standing near them.

“Yes, Mr. Meyers?”

“Your sister received a notice from His Grace that he would be unable to attend her this afternoon. She and Mrs. Compton then called for a coach and departed.”

“What of their destination?” The butler looked nervous and Calvin took a step closer. “Meyers, what do you know?”

“I heard Mrs. Compton tell the driver to take them to Blackfriars Road, milord.”

“What?” Calvin crumpled the papers in his hand. His rage was back, and stronger in force. “What for?”

“For the penny gaff, milord.”

“Oh holy hell,” Ethan whispered. “I will send for my carriage. Maybe we can stop them before they get there.”

“Doubtful,” Calvin said, trying to once again get a handle on his anger. “But we can certainly find them and bring them home. After that, I will figure out what to do with the both of them.”

Chapter Four

“I cannot believe I let you talk me into this.” Margaret kept Vesta’s elbow firmly in her hand. “If we are lucky, we will just end up being robbed.”

“Nonsense.” Vesta’s voice was high with excitement. “This is thrilling, and something I will probably never be able to do again. Thank you for bringing me here.”

Margaret guided her toward a less crowded portion of the theater. “Vesta, a penny gaff can be fun, yes. It is cheap entertainment for the masses. But you stand out like a fishmonger at Parliament. The people who attend these events are not in your social circle.”

“I know. That is why it is fascinating to me. Did you see that woman over there? Is she a prostitute?”

“More than likely.” Margaret gazed around at the crowd, then tightened her grip on Vesta’s arm. “We should not have come here. Let us leave now, before something untoward happens.”

Why had she listened to Vesta when she had pronounced a desire to see the penny gaff? It was a place for the lower classes to gather for entertainment, not for ladies like Vesta. The huge crush of workers, and the smell of unwashed bodies and greasy food filled the air. Her judgment was definitely not in fine form today. Showing Vesta *The Duke’s Mistress* in private was one thing. Putting her in danger by bringing her to Blackfriars Road was another. If something happened to her...if they were attacked...

“We must go.” Margaret started toward the door.

“No.” Vesta pulled away from her grip. “We are here, and I want to see the skit about the highwayman.”

“You are acting like a child now.” Margaret took a step toward her, her gaze centering on a man who watched them intently, his eyes wide with interest. “It was wrong of me to bring you here. Now, you must obey me and we must leave. Now.”

“No.” Vesta turned toward the stage and Margaret stepped in front of her, just as the man came up to their side.

“Is there a problem, luvs?”

Margaret shook her head and put herself between the man and Vesta. “We are just leaving.”

“Why? The fun’s about to start. There is a cock fight in ‘ta other room if ya’s interested.”

“What is that?” Margaret could hear the renewed excitement in Vesta’s voice. The man snorted out a laugh and Margaret groaned.

“A true innocent, aren’t ya? I’ll be yer guide, and protection, for a fee.”

“Protection from what?” Vesta giggled. “Will the actors attack us if we boo them?”

Margaret tried to keep a tight rein on the fear flowing through her. Why had she listened to Vesta? When she had come here before, it had been with Jonathan, and no one had bothered them. But she knew this attracted honest workers looking for fun, and less than honest people looking for trouble.

“Vesta, he is talking about protection from everyone else.”

“Five quid.” The man took a step forward and Margaret snorted out a derisive sound.

“We don’t need to see a skit about a highwayman, we have one standing in front of us. Asking for five quid is robbery at its finest.”

The man narrowed his gaze at her, his anger evident. “You watch watcha say, missie. The price just climbed to seven quid. I be your best bet at getting out of ‘ere with your purse—and other things—intact.”

Margaret’s fear turned to anger. “Oh really?” She moved until she was inches away from him. “Or maybe this is.” She pulled up her skirt and jerked her knee upwards, hitting him sharply between the legs.

The man tumbled to the floor, shrieking in pain

She said a silent thank you prayer to Jonathan for teaching her that little skill, then grabbed Vesta’s hand and ran for the exit.

“Margaret!” Vesta’s excitement had turned to panic. “Someone is trying to grab my reticule.”

Margaret pushed Vesta in front of her, kicking out at the woman who had a hold of the soft bag in Vesta's hand. The woman released the reticule and ran before Margaret's foot met its target. Margaret stumbled slightly, crying out when strong hands grabbed her arms.

"I have you, Mrs. Compton." She looked up into deep blue eyes, dread settling like a rock in her stomach. Recognition dawned as the face came into focus, but her dread increased. If Lord Ethan was here, Lord Melbrook was not far behind.

"Lord Ethan." She jerked her head around, fear making her hands shake. "Where is Vesta?"

"With her brother, heading for their carriage. You will come with me in mine."

"But..."

"Do not argue with me." He propelled her toward the door, putting his arm around her and pulling her close. "You are in enough trouble as it is."

They exited the building into bright sunlight and Margaret caught a glimpse of the earl helping Vesta into the family carriage Vesta and she had used to get here. She tried to head in that direction, but Lord Ethan pulled her in the other, stopping in front of his carriage.

He opened the door and pushed her toward the opening. "In you go."

Part of her wanted to melt into the street rather than face what she knew was about to happen. By this evening, she would be minus a place to live, and minus her position. She had a few funds set back that would hold her for a matter of weeks, but other than that, the future now looked black as night.

She settled into the seat as her rescuer climbed in, banging the door closed behind him. He rapped on the roof and the carriage shot forward.

"How did you find us?"

"I would not worry about that so much as I would about myself. I should take you over my knee right now and spank you, saving Melbrook the trouble. Do you realize what you have done?"

"Yes, I do." She swallowed hard. "There is an inn up ahead. Please drop me there and I will send for my things."

"Oh no, you are not getting out of it that easy. Between this and your talk of pleasuring yourself this morning, I would think Melbrook would like the chance to talk with you. And I will not deprive him of it."

“What?” Her body felt like jelly now.

“Oh yes, we overheard your little conversation. He knows about *The Duke’s Mistress*, too.”

Margaret put her hand on her stomach, feeling as if she would lose what food she had eaten that day. Somehow, things had turned from bad to worse, and there was no telling where it would go from here.

* * * *

Margaret sat on a couch across from Vesta, who stared at the floor, her hands clasped together in her lap. Lord Melbrook stood near the fireplace, his gaze concentrated on the flames. Lord Ethan sat in a chair, his pose the only relaxed one in the room.

“You have compromised my sister, Mrs. Compton. Do you realize what will happen if Waterford hears of your little outing?”

“Yes, milord.” She tried to keep her voice soft. “I offer my sincere apologies.”

Silence reigned for a few moments and then he turned to her. “You are discharged, without reference.”

Tears burned Margaret’s eyes. Without a reference, she would never land another position such as this one. She would end her days as a barmaid, serving food and ale to people like the man they had encountered at the penny gaff that afternoon.

“No.” Vesta spoke up, her gaze now boring into her brother. “I will not allow you to do that to her.”

“You will not *allow* it?” He snorted out a laugh. “You have little choice. If news of this gets to anyone, and Waterford washes his hands of you, you will end your days as an old maid. Do you want that? Her incompetence has put you in this situation, one that could ruin your standing in society.”

“I could give a flip about that.” Vesta stood and Margaret watched her in surprise. “She has been a good friend to me, and I will not allow you to throw her on the streets. She stays and will come with me to Waterford’s house when I marry.”

“*If* you marry, you mean.” He stepped to the side table and picked up the pamphlets that Margaret knew very well. “Today’s little stunt, plus your recent exposure to these, could put a halt to everything.”

He waved the papers at Vesta, and Margaret watched the color drain from the younger woman's face. "She takes you to participate in base entertainments, and she teaches you how to be a whore. Why should I keep her in my employ?"

"You searched my room?"

"So you admit they are yours?" Lord Melbrook took a step closer to her. "Thank you for not denying it."

"I am not ashamed of reading it. I am a grown woman."

"You are a grown woman who is soon to be a Duchess, if things are not ruined now. You should behave as such." He shouted the words.

Margaret stood up and moved over to Vesta. "He is right; what I did today was wrong. Showing you the papers in private is one thing, but today was a very public event. It could have devastating consequences."

"Indeed," Lord Ethan said.

Margaret shifted her gaze to where he sat with a slight smile on his face.

"I do not care," Vesta said. She turned her gaze to her brother. "If you discharge her, I will break my engagement with the Duke of Waterford."

"You would not do such a thing." Lord Melbrook's voice was flat with anger.

"I would. Tonight." Vesta shot him an angry glare and Margaret fought back a smile. "I am not a child, Calvin. If you can bed Lady Morset, then I can learn about what happens between a man and a woman by reading those pages you hold. And I will not let you punish the only true friend I have had of late."

"Vesta, I..." Margaret stopped talking when Vesta held up her hand.

"No. I know what I saw the other day. Is your affair with Lady Morset not putting her in a compromised position? Or is it different because she is a widow? I repeat myself, I will not allow you to punish Margaret for things that were my idea."

"She will not stay in this house. If you take her on when you are wed to Waterford, then that is your choice, but I will not allow her to pollute your mind any longer before then. I will not have my sister turned into a whore."

Vesta's controlled scream shocked Margaret to the core. She had never heard the woman so much as raise her voice until now. "You are a horrid...brute—"

“If I may.” Lord Ethan strode in front of Vesta, putting his finger near her lips. “Before things are said that will cause irreparable damage, may I suggest that myself and Mrs. Compton retire to my home near Bath? We can spend the time before the wedding there, and, if Waterford allows it, you can take her back into your home after you are wed, Vesta. That will keep her out from under your roof, Calvin, and not put Mrs. Compton out on the streets.”

“I will go with her.” Vesta crossed her arms over her chest.

“No.” Lord Melbrook shook his head and put his hands on his hips. “You will stay here, act as if nothing has happened, and pray Waterford remains ignorant of your activities, both in private and in public.”

“Out of the question,” Vesta said. “I will do as I please and—”

“I will do it,” Margaret said, cutting Vesta’s words off. “I think it is the perfect plan. Once again, Lord Melbrook, I apologize for my errors in judgment, and I will go pack my things. Lord Ethan, I will be ready to leave within the hour.”

“Excellent,” he replied.

“Vesta, it is for the best,” Margaret explained, her heart breaking at the tears she saw on the younger woman’s face. “I will take my punishment for what I have done, and pray that when the time comes, I will be able to come with you to your household.”

She hurried from the room before Vesta could respond, counting her blessings that she would not be on the streets tonight, fighting off robbers, or worse. Being alone in the country would give her time to consider what she had done, and hopefully learn from her mistakes.

Margaret hurried up the stairs and stepped inside her room, closing the door firmly behind her. “Jonathan, what have I done?”

She waited for an answer, but received none. Then she pulled out her valise and quickly filled it with her few possessions, realizing she was missing one of the most important items: *The Duke’s Mistress*. She wanted it back, but how would she ask for it when Lord Melbrook was so furious? He had probably burned it by now.

Tears filled her eyes at the thought, but she knew there was nothing for it now. It would be lost to her forever, and she had no one to blame but herself.

15 August, 1880

Dear _____,

How I laughed when I read your letter. If I could give you daily reports on my adventures I would, but alas that is not possible with you living so far from London. Can you not convince your husband to come for a visit? Even for a few weeks? See what you can do, my dearest cousin, for I miss you so.

Things have changed greatly since my last letter. I can no longer sign my correspondence the Duke's lover. Instead I must sign them the Duke's mistress, for that is what I am. His mistress. He has taken over my life as surely as a husband takes over a wife's. He controls my body, my clothing, even the food that I eat. He insists that I attend certain parties so that he may see he me there, and try to arrange some way for us to be intimate as we were on our first occasion.

The real shock to me is that we have managed to keep our affair private. The fact that we are carrying on in front of London society makes the secrecy a complete and utter miracle. Of course I could be wrong, and people may know about His Grace's visits to my house. But I do not think so

And now I carry on when you do not want to hear such things. What was it that you wrote? Tell me of his prick. Does it still fit in your cunny? It fits very well, thank you. And I have learned to take him in my mouth, also. I think it thrills him beyond belief to see me on my knees, my mouth open and ready to accept him.

Our first attempt at this was not a success, and I was afraid it would anger him. Instead he stroked my hair and told me to calm down. When my breathing had subsided enough for him he instructed me to lick his cock, to gently bathe him with my tongue.

He held his manhood up, giving me proper access to the underside, which I have found to be the most sensitive. He shakes when I lick him there and I have found that I love the feel of him on my tongue.

“My Melody,” he said while I licked him. “Do not forget my bullocks.” Of course I did as he asked, savoring the feel of the now tight sacs under my tongue. Did you know there was a difference between them when a man is aroused? It is true. The draw up and expand with his seed, and I have had great pleasure in playing with them while he groaned and thrust his prick toward my face.

After the first disastrous attempt I was finally able to take him into my mouth, savoring the taste of him. His skin is salty, and the smell musky, but it is very agreeable. You must open your mouth very wide, and mind your teeth lest you hurt him. These were the instructions he gave me, not something I discovered by accident.

During the first successful attempt I sucked him for some time before he lifted me and bent me over, thrusting his prick into me with one swift movement. I was very glad that tasting him had made my quim wet and there was no pain with his entry. On the contrary I spent almost immediately, tightening myself around him.

He takes great pleasure in spanking my bottom while he fucks me this way, and this time was no exception. He slapped my buttocks over and over again, on both sides. One major difference that I have noticed between him and _____ is that His Grace can fuck me for much longer. Sometimes I want him to stop, because the feeling can become painful. If this happens he seems to recognize it immediately.

At times, His Grace will stop and turn me so that I am on my back. Then his hands go to where his prick was, playing with my quim, lighting anew the fire that had been there when he entered me. He will tug and prod my clit until I spend, the pleasure roaring through my body as I beg for his cock again.

He likes to hear me beg, sometimes making me do it several times during our couplings.

“Beg for my prick, Melody, let me know you want it.” I always oblige, telling him how wonderful he feels, how full he makes my cunt feel.

“Please, Your Grace, it is magnificent. Let me feel your hot, hard prick inside me.” He will wait to take me until my pleas are high and shrill, and I wonder if they will attract the attention of passersby.

When he has left I sometimes wonder about what goes on between us. He is masterful with me, demanding that I attend to his every need. But in turn he likes to play with my cunny,

making me spend. So many times he has stood by after ordering me to “Play with my clit and prepare my cunny for his prick.”

He watches while I do so, his eyes fixed as my hand roams from my breasts to my pussy.

“You are beautiful, Melody. I knew the first time I saw you that I had to have you. I will possess you completely before long.”

I tell him that he already has, but he just shakes his head, leaving me to wonder what he means. Do you know, dear cousin? Can you imagine what he means by possessing me completely? How much more complete can it be? I allowed him between my thighs without the benefit of a call or any kind of proper engagement first. I have taken him inside my mouth, and let him fuck me three times in one day. Three times. Can you imagine? He spent the whole afternoon with me and did not allow me to dress the entire time.

Twice he took me from behind, riding me (there could be no other term for it) until I cried out. He would slow, then, and allow me to rest before starting again. When he slowed his thrusts his fingers were always on my little nub, making me quake with need of him. When I would buck my hips he would start again. His strength amazes me. I spent twice during that session, but my clitoris throbbed for days afterward.

Before he left he ordered me to play with my cunny four or five times a day. “Fuck yourself with a candle if need be,” he said. “I would like to think of you doing that.” This way, he said, I would be ready for his prick whenever he arrived to claim me. I am ashamed to say I follow his instructions, and find myself in an almost constant state of arousal.

I find myself waiting for him to arrive at my home. Some days he will not be able to visit, and when that happens he always sends me a gift, flowers, or something sweet from the bakery. I play with my quim, pretending he is watching. I have, as a dutiful mistress, even taken a candle into my cunny, sliding it back and forth and pretending it is his cock.

When I told His Grace of this he came by some afternoons to watch while I slid the candle in and out of my cunt. Sometimes he would bring himself pleasure while he watched, and other times I would pleasure him with my mouth, kneeling next to him while he slowly inserted the candle in my quim, drawing it back and forth while I sucked him.

It is not the most pleasant of activities alone, but when His Grace is there it becomes much more enjoyable, and if I play with my quim I can actually spend, despite the fact the candle does not fill me as his prick does.

I hope you are well and I miss you terribly. Please, please try to convince your husband to let you come to London.

Take care my dear friend,

The Duke's Mistress

Part II

The Companion's Banishment

Chapter Five

“I must thank you, once again, Lord Ethan, for offering me your home as a refuge.”

The carriage bounced along, and Margaret was thankful for the dark. She hoped the tone of her voice would not reveal the fact she was crying, but she was sure it did.

“You are welcome, Mrs. Compton. Since we are to live in close quarters, I must insist on your calling me Ethan.”

“As you wish.”

“What you did was wrong, you know. The two of you could have been harmed in an area such as Blackfriars Road. It is dangerous down there.”

“I can only hope that when the Duke of Waterford hears of it, he will not think me a bad influence and refuse me employment once he and Vesta are married.”

“I do not know him well enough to assure you either way.”

She nodded, then pulled back the curtain over the window. It seemed as if they have been traveling for hours. The night was black and she prayed they would not meet a highwayman. That would be the perfect addition to an already terrible day.

“Are we getting close?”

“I would say so,” he replied. “The trip takes about six hours by coach, and we have been in here for about that long. You should close your eyes, try and rest. I will wake you when we arrive.”

“Thank you.” She did as he suggested, hoping sleep would take her. But it did not and she replayed the day, the conversation about the novel, and the trip to the penny gaff. She had never made such poor choices before. What made her start now? It was as if some unseen force was at work, making her do things she would not normally do.

Lord Ethan announced they were almost there. Margaret sat bolt upright and looked out the window again. The shadow of a house emerged from the dark—a huge house from the looks of it.

“You live alone?”

“Yes. It was a thirtieth birthday present from my father. He hoped I would fill it with children. But since I have yet to find a wife, that has not happened.”

That information surprised her. Lord Ethan was very handsome, and she was sure any number of young women would love to be his wife, even if he would never inherit his father’s title.

The carriage rolled to a stop in front of the house and he helped her to alight. The door to the manor opened and a man stepped out, bowing to Lord Ethan.

“Mr. Hathaway, this is Mrs. Compton. She will be staying with us for a while. Please have the rooms across from mine prepared for her.”

Across from him?

What exactly did he mean? She wanted to ask, but neither man provided her the opportunity.

“They are ready as always milord.” He glanced behind them. “Shall I take the lady’s bags?”

“Get one of the boys to do it. It is late and I am sure she is tired. Please show her to her rooms and make sure she has everything she will need.”

Lord Ethan turned to her. “Mrs. Compton, I bid you goodnight.”

“Goodnight, and thank you.”

He nodded and Margaret followed the butler up the stairs. The size of the house amazed her. When Mr. Hathaway opened one of the many doors in a long hallway and ushered Margaret inside, her eyes widened.

“There must be a mistake. I should be in the guest’s quarters.”

“No mistake, madam. Do you require a bath this evening?”

“No, thank you.”

He bowed and left just as a young boy, a stable hand from the looks of him, came inside carrying her bags. He deposited them just inside the door before nodding slightly and turning to quickly exit the room.

Margaret wandered through the huge suite of rooms until she came to a bed. She looked at her surroundings, tears filling her eyes once again as she thought of being banished, of what would happen to her in the future.

“You have no one to blame but yourself,” she said softly. And then she dropped onto the bed and cried into the pillow, eventually falling asleep with all her clothes still intact.

* * * *

“It is a shame to prepare food for you, only to see it fed to the dogs.”

Margaret lifted her gaze to Lord Ethan, who sat at the end of the table, enjoying the delicious dinner the cook had prepared for them. Or at least she thought it was delicious. She had only taken a few bites before losing her appetite.

“I am sorry, milord, I just am not hungry.”

He set his fork back on his plate and leaned toward her. “My name is Ethan, as I have repeated several times. In addition, I would hate to have you put into my care, only to have to send word to London that you starved yourself to death in the first week. Please, eat something.”

She ran her fork through the center of the plate, sending a few peas over the edge, then cleared her throat. “Have you heard from Lord Melbrook?”

“I have.” He took another bite and she watched him chew.

“How is Vesta faring?”

“She is well, playing her part and dancing every night with Waterford, although Calvin confesses that she is not happy about your absence.”

Margaret cut a piece of roast, then glanced up at him. “I have a letter written for her. Will you see that you she gets it?”

He put down his fork and folded his hands together, lifting his index fingers to his lips. “Mrs. Compton, you are not a prisoner here. You may post your own letters. And, I might remind you there are many activities to keep you occupied here on the grounds. You could take a turn around the gardens, or have one of the horses saddled for a ride—something you told me you do.”

“Yes, I have ridden in the past.”

“Then make use of it and do not sit in your room all day long like you will soon be going to the gallows. If you would like, I will arrange an outing in town. We can go and see the Roman baths. I think you would find it enjoyable.”

She nodded absentmindedly and then took a bite of food. “Delicious.”

“Mrs. Haskell was starting to doubt her cooking abilities after she sent out several full plates and received them in the same condition.” He took a sip of his wine and looked at her as if

waiting for her to say something. When she didn't, he cleared his throat. "Do you play backgammon, or chess?"

"Yes, both."

"Good. After dinner we shall play a few games. I do not know about you, but I find myself rather bored at night. There is only so much reading and writing a person can do."

"I would be happy to play a game with you, milord."

"Ethan, Mrs. Compton. My name is Ethan."

She took another bite, the wonderful taste flowing through her mouth. She swallowed hard, then cut another piece. "If I am to call you Ethan, you must call me Margaret."

"It will be my pleasure, Margaret." He went back to his food and Margaret did the same, eating more in a few bites than she had since her banishment to Bath. Not that it was much of a punishment, really. Lord Ethan's house was enormous, and lavishly decorated, filled with ornate furniture and paintings.

Situated across the hall from Lord Ethan's rooms, her assigned quarters seemed more like an apartment, with a bedroom and sitting room, as well as bathing and dressing room. The sitting room was furnished with a beautiful sofa and chairs situated near the fireplace. A balcony overlooked the beautifully kept gardens.

The bedroom contained a huge tester bed, larger than any Margaret had ever slept in, and an enormous wardrobe. Half of it was still empty after Margaret had placed her clothes inside. The fireplace in the bedroom seemed large enough for the bed to fit in, and kept the room blazingly warm. As a prison, it was more than satisfying.

Lord Ethan was more than a pleasant jailor, also.

She glanced at him from under lowered lashes, once again marveling at his handsome face and strong hands. His deep blue eyes always seemed to hold humor, and his lips were fuller than she'd seen any man's. He wore his dark hair a little longer than was fashionable, something that made him look like something of a rake.

"Which do you prefer?"

"I am sorry, what?" She shook her head in confusion.

"Backgammon or chess? Which board should I set up?"

"I prefer backgammon."

He stood and placed his napkin next to his plate. "Meet me in the library in an hour."

Margaret took a few more bites, savoring the delicious meal. Truthfully she had been too distraught to eat since their flight from London. She had spent the two days in her room, only coming to the table at Lord Ethan's stern request. He had insisted that she eat, but today was the first time she had eaten more than a few bites, and while her stomach had originally protested the food, now it seemed to crave it.

She cleaned her plate of food, then put down her fork. The serving dishes were bare. Had she really eaten so much?

"Shall I send for more?" The young maid gave her a shy look.

"No, thank you. But please convey my thanks to the cook for an excellent meal."

"Yes, Ma'am." The maid curtsied and left the room.

Margaret went to her rooms and washed her face, then picked up the letter she had written to Vesta. She hoped the missive explained her reasons for so readily accepting the escape Lord Ethan had offered her after the trip to the penny gaff. She never should have allowed Vesta to talk her into such a thing. She sat down and read it once more, satisfied that she had made her point well enough to let Vesta know she did not blame her for what happened. Margaret took full responsibility for the trip, and for introducing Vesta to *The Duke's Mistress*.

The urge came over her to add a postscript asking whether Vesta knew what had become of Margaret's pamphlets. She was sure, however, that Lord Melbrook would look over the letter before—or if—it was ever seen by his sister. Margaret did not want to cause any more problems for the future Duchess.

She folded the letter carefully, then applied red wax and a seal with a C on it. The seal had been Jonathan's, and it was something she treasured. Now that the pamphlets were gone, it was one of the few items she had left of his.

A glance at the clock showed it was time for her to go to the library and meet Lord Ethan. She slipped the letter into her pocket as she left her room and moved toward the library, her footsteps echoing in the empty hallway.

She found Lord Ethan sitting in a chair, throwing dice onto a backgammon board. "I was starting to think you would not come." He glanced up and her breath caught in her throat. In the light from the fireplace, he seemed even more handsome than he had earlier in the day.

"Forgive me, Lord Ethan, but I was making sure all was in order with my letter." She slid the missive across the table. "If you would, please."

“If I would what, read it?”

A slight smile tipped the edge of her mouth. “Post it, please.”

“Tomorrow we will go into Bath; you can post it yourself. And no, I will not forgive you.”

Her smile turned to shock. “Milord?”

“What did I tell you earlier, about my name?”

Her smile returned. “Ethan.”

“Now if you could just remember that, things would be better. Shall we roll to see who takes the first turn?”

He won the toss and she soon found out he was a skilled player, sending her markers to the center square three times in the first ten moves.

“Do you always play this poorly, or is your mind simply occupied by other things?”

“I beg your pardon?” She stared at him, dumbfounded. “There is no need to be so rude.”

“I think there is. It hurts my ego to be sitting in front of a beautiful woman while her mind is anywhere but on me, and what we are doing together.”

She put her dice down on the board. “Perhaps I should go upstairs.”

“Perhaps you should stop acting so put upon, like the weight of the world is on your shoulders. You made a mistake. Let it go.” He glanced at her sharply. “You are punishing yourself, and punishing me, I might add, with your attitude.”

“My attitude? How dare you?”

“Quite easily. I gave you a perfect out for the situation and you repay me by moping about. You cannot even play a decent game of backgammon.”

She pushed away from the table, walking a short distance from her chair before whirling back to face him. “What would you have me do, *milord*, drop to my knees and thank you?”

“Depends on what you would be doing while you are on your knees.”

Her anger increased as he smiled at her. “Is that why you brought me here?”

“No. I brought you here because you intrigue me, and because I did not want to see you put onto the streets. However, if I had known you were going to walk around like a ghost, I would not have made the offer.”

“Perhaps I should leave then.” She put her hands on her hips, glaring at him.

“It is a little late for that, do you not think? I am afraid you are stuck with me.”

“And you with me, for three months. After that, I will leave your home, I swear it.” She bit her lip to fight back tears. “I would like it if you would just let me stay in my room.”

He stood and crossed to her quickly. She was tempted to retreat as he grew nearer, but she would be damned if she would back down from him. He stopped inches away from her, and she could feel the heat from his body, see the anger flashing in his eyes.

“You know what I would like? I would like you to smile as I have seen in the past. I would like you to laugh. I would like you to stop dwelling on the mistakes you made. They are over and done with. Please stop acting like being in my home is punishment, because if a penalty is what you seek to atone for what happened, it can be arranged.”

The meaning of his words hit her like a slap in the face. “You would not dare.”

“Try me.” He stepped even closer and she could feel his breath on her cheek. “Straighten up, Margaret, or I will take you over my knee. Maybe it is something you need.”

Her hands clenched into fists. No one had ever threatened her with spanking, not even Jonathan the few times they were angry at each other.

“And here I thought you were such a nice gentleman. It seems I was wrong.”

His eyes crinkled at the edges as if he would smile. “I am, but I do not care to spend the next three months watching you pout. A week has been enough.”

Margaret resisted the urge to give him the same treatment she had given their attacker in the penny gaff. He had, after all, put a roof over her head. But that didn't mean she had to be submissive to what he wanted.

“I regret to inform you, Ethan, that I am not a proper lady who demurs to everything a man says. If you do not like my attitude, that is your problem. Not mine. My life is in turmoil and I am sorry that I cannot simply forget it and play the simpering miss for you.”

“I never said I wanted you to be a simpering miss; far from it. I like your spirit. But that spirit is not with you right now, is it? You seem to have left it at the penny gaff. Perhaps we should go back and search for it.”

Tears stung her eyes and she turned away from him, heading for the door. She was inches away from escape when he grabbed her arm and spun her around. “Maybe Calvin was right and this situation is far too easy on you. Perhaps I stepped in too quickly. Either way, I believe what is about to happen will light a fire in your belly and cause you to stop moping about.”

He turned toward the far side of the room, pulling her behind him.

“What are you doing?” Even as the words left her mouth, she knew exactly what he was going to do. He was going to spank her, just as he’d threatened. She put her free hand on his arm, trying to free herself, but his grip was firm and her struggles did not even slow his steps.

Ethan sat down on the couch with a heavy thump, pulling her across his lap. She increased her resistance, trying to fight her way out of his grip. But when she kicked her legs, she hit nothing but sofa, and it moved her skirt up her legs. When she felt his hand on her thigh she gasped.

“Unhand me!”

He pushed the skirt further up and cold air drifted across her bare skin. “Well,” he murmured, “maybe you do have spirit. How is it that you are not wearing bloomers under your skirt?”

Embarrassment coursed through her. Truth was she hated bloomers, and resisted wearing them. It was a habit left over from her days with Jonathan, who had told her he liked to know she was bare under her dress.

“Lord Ethan, please, I...”

“Wrong answer.” His hand smacked her bare bottom and she yelped, the sting taking hold and spreading through her naked bum. Another slap came down, and then another and she screamed, her frustration building with each slap.

“Lord Ethan!” The slaps grew harder, her bum aching more.

“Is this what you want, Margaret? Will this be punishment enough so you will stop beating yourself up over something that cannot be changed and, as far as I can tell at this moment, caused little damage?”

He had stopped spanking while he spoke, but the minute the words stopped, the spanking started again. She tried to wiggle away, but he lifted a leg, letting hers fall between his, then brought his back down so she was effectively trapped.

Tears filled her eyes, but they were not from pain. What made him think he had the right? He was not her guardian, and if she was not a prisoner here then that did not make him her jailor.

“Unhand me!” The spanking continued, the slaps growing harder. And in this high-end household, not one member of the staff would step in to save her from her spanking, of that she was sure.

“Milord.” She kept her voice even, hoping a different tactic would work to stop her punishment. “I pray you stop.”

The smacks seemed to grow harder and when she felt a tear slip over the edge of her eye she whispered, “Ethan, please stop.”

His hand stilled immediately, and she let out a sigh of relief.

“Much better,” he said softly. “I trust I have made my point?”

“Yes.” Part of her expected him to take liberties with her body while she was half-naked across his lap. But he did not. He put his hands on her hips and moved his leg, helping her to stand.

Margaret backed away from him. When he did not rise from the sofa, she stopped moving.

“I hope tomorrow I will see a new and improved Margaret at the breakfast table, someone who is more like the Margaret I knew in London.” He frowned at her. “I rather dislike the pouty Margaret who acts like a mudlark.”

“As you wish, Ethan.” She turned on her heel and strode from the room, heading for the stairs. In the hallway she came across two maids, who turned away, but not before she saw the pity in their faces. Her anger increased as she took the stairs, turning at the top and hurrying into her room.

Did he really think he could manhandle her like that and order her about? If he was not a jailor, he was doing a very fine impression of one. She paced back and forth in front of the fire, wondering how she would make it back to London alone if she left the house tonight.

The answer was simple: she would not leave. There would be no way for her to travel such a distance with the small amount of money she had, and there would be little chance of someone not trying to take advantage of a woman on her own.

“Better the devil you know,” she whispered. Then she snorted out a laugh. “You want a different woman, milord. Well then you shall get one.”

She hurried to the door, pulling it open and startling a maid who was walking down the corridor. “Bring me a pair of scissors, please. Right now.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Margaret smiled as the young girl scampered away. In the morning she would show Lord Ethan he could not run over her and dictate how she would act. And she would take great pleasure in the demonstration.

Chapter Six

Ethan took a sip from his teacup and settled back in his chair, looking at the empty spot next to him. She should have been down already. He knew she had not slipped away last night because he had seen a sliver of light under her door when he had finally gone to his bed around two a.m. Once there, he tossed and turned, his cock throbbing with need. Taking Margaret over his lap had been designed to break her out of the haze that had settled over her. He was not sure that had happened, but it did have one affect he was aware of: a throbbing desire for her that he could not shake.

The minute he had seen her bare bottom under her skirts, he had wanted to change the spanking into a seduction. That would not work, though—perhaps in a few days but not now. It was too soon for that.

He hoped he hadn't spanked her too hard. He also hoped it had done exactly what it was supposed to do. He glanced at the grandfather clock and took another sip of his tea. He was about to signal for a maid to go and see what was keeping her when the door opened and she walked inside.

His gaze locked on her barely covered body as she moved toward the table. She had obviously taken a pair of scissors to the shift she wore, cutting it low to reveal a great deal of bosom, then cutting it high on the sides to reveal creamy thighs. She had fastened a corset over the shift, pulling in her stomach and pushing up her already large breasts.

The result was a very voluptuous figure that made his cock, still randy from touching her the previous night, press against the stay of his trousers, begging to be let loose, wanting to fill her. She wore her dark hair down, curled around her shoulders. Her brown eyes shown with mischief as she sat down and reached for the teapot.

“Good morning, Ethan.”

“Margaret.” He watched her intently as she took her plate and filled it from the dishes on the table. Her breasts peaked out from the shift, her hardened nipples pressing against the thin material. “Did you sleep well?”

He could tell his question caught her by surprise and he fought back a smile. If she thought to get a rise out of him by parading into the room half-naked she was about to learn otherwise. She got a rise out of him all right, but not in the way she wanted.

“I slept very well. And yourself?”

“For the most part.” *After I took matters into my own hand.* “I wonder how much sleep you had, though. It seems you were up creating a new style for yourself.”

“You said you wanted to see a new woman. I am simply obliging you, Ethan.”

“Yes, so I see.” He picked up a piece of bacon, put it into his mouth and crunched. “We shall leave right after breakfast, to post your letter.”

Her mouth hung open and he winked at her. “That is what you wanted, right? To post your letter as soon as possible so it will get to Vesta?” He nodded toward a maid, who had stood rooted to the floor since Margaret walked into the room.

“Please go upstairs and retrieve Mrs. Compton’s letter for Lady Vesta. Is it on your desk, Margaret?”

Margaret stood quickly. “I will go and get it.”

And give yourself a chance to change? Not likely. “No, stay and eat. I have already ordered the carriage prepared to leave right after we eat, so having the letter down here will speed things up.”

He recognized the horror that passed over her face when she realized he meant for her to go into Bath dressed exactly as she was.

“Is something wrong?” He tried to look as innocent as possible as he spoke, watching her carefully as she considered her answer. Finally, she licked her lips slowly and his cock throbbed more intently.

“I am half-naked.”

“Rather a fetching ensemble.”

Her mouth opened in a perfect O of surprise and he shifted in his seat, hoping she did not realize why. He would love to reach out, bring her onto his lap so that she straddled him, riding him hard until they both screamed in passion. He imagined her breasts bouncing as she moved,

her nipples standing erect for his attention. He could reach out, lick them, suck them into his mouth.

The throbbing increased and he shifted yet again. "Hurry and eat, Margaret. It is a beautiful day outside and we do not want to waste it sitting here."

He was happy to see her eat, such a nice change from the past week when she would stare at the food, refusing more than a few bites.

How could eating turn into something so erotic? He watched her mouth, wanting nothing more than for his prick to take the place of the spoon sliding past her lips. She ate her porridge and bacon, then took a sip of tea before wiping her mouth daintily.

"I am ready whenever you are, Ethan."

"Good." He stood and offered his hand. "I am eager to show you Bath. It really is a beautiful city."

Ethan felt the tremble in her hand as she put it in his. For a moment he thought about relenting, telling her to go upstairs and change into more suitable clothing. And then he noticed her nipples, pressing against the shift, hard nubs that seemed to beg for his attention.

It was all he could do not to lift her in his arms and carry her up to his bed. To hell with the letter; they could post it tomorrow. Right now he wanted nothing more than to bury himself in her wetness, make her peak over and over until she was panting for breath.

She pushed back her chair and released his hand, heading for the front of the house. She took the cape offered to her by Mr. Hathaway, the butler, then headed out the door, her head held high.

Ethan smiled. This could definitely prove to be a fun afternoon.

* * * *

Margaret clutched the cape around her, fighting to ignore the fear that had wrapped around her while she walked from the house to the carriage. What had she been thinking? Had she thought her attire would shock him enough that he would tell her to go back upstairs, to stay away from him for the day?

It had produced just the opposite effect, though. Proof of that had come when she had turned at the carriage door, her gaze cast downward. The outline of his cock had been prominent against his trousers. Despite the cold of the morning, seeing that evidence of his arousal heated

her through and through. It made her forget her clothing, and the letter, and anything else but herself and the man now sitting opposite her.

She had not wanted a man since Jonathan died, but she wanted one now. She wanted Lord Ethan.

What was wrong with her? Had she taken leave of all her senses? Certainly her reason had taken flight.

“There is a rather good museum in town that features Roman artifacts. If I remember correctly, you enjoy visiting museums.”

How did he know that? “Yes, I do. But...”

“We will post the letter, then visit the museum before the crowd grows too large. We can take an early afternoon tea at a shop near the Baths, and then head back for home. Do those plans agree with you?”

Margaret nodded, clutching the cloak tighter. “Truthfully, I do think it would be a perfect outing. But I must insist on going back to the house to change. Please.”

“No.” His deep blue eyes focused on her and her body quivered in response. She felt open and ready for him, the wetness from her quim coating her thighs. No man had ever made her feel this way except...

“Jonathan,” she whispered under her breath, and remembered him sitting on the edge of her bed, telling her she needed to keep her promise to him. It was almost as if he had known what was about to happen.

She clutched at the edges of the cape, refusing to give in to what she felt. She may want Ethan’s body, but she was not of his station, and there was no way she would allow herself to be used as his whore. The clothing had been a mistake, meant to shock him and pay him back for the spanking he had given her last night. It had turned bad and she would now have to deal with the ensuing mess.

As long as she kept the cape wrapped securely around her person, no one but the two of them would know what she wore underneath. It would only be for a few hours. How hard could it be? She swallowed a groan as she thought about something else that was hard—something belonging to the man sitting right across from her.

The most difficult part of this entire excursion might be the carriage ride, with them so close together in such a small space. How long would it take for them to get near town? The

carriage was plodding along at a snail's pace, and she wondered if the driver would pick up a bit of speed if she rapped on the ceiling, or if that would be some secret code for him to slow down to give Ethan more time with whatever woman he had inside at the moment.

Margaret was sure he had been in here with other women. A man like Ethan did not want for female companionship. The idea did not make her jealous, but she had to admit that it did make her wonder about him. Could he please a woman? She somehow knew he could, with those long fingers and his hard prick. Would his mouth...

"Tell me of your family." His words jolted her out of her thoughts.

"Pardon?"

"Your family. I understand you are a widow. What of the rest of your family?"

"My parents own a small estate in Windsor. My father raises livestock and supervises the yearly harvest. He is constantly trying to come up with improved farming methods, and has never shied away from hard work."

"And your late husband? What did he do?"

A smile spread across her face. "He made me laugh." When Ethan returned the smile, she giggled. "Jonathan was a vicar. It was enjoyable work for him, and he always used his time off to meet me at the museum so we could explore the exhibits, talk of history and the possibility that one day..." Her voice broke and she cleared it. "...That one day we might be able to travel and see some of the places where history actually took place."

"I am sorry for your loss. How long has he been gone?"

"Three years, although it seems like so long ago." She felt her nerves relax just a little. "We met at the museum. Both of us were admiring the Egyptian wing, looking at the newly acquired artifacts. I had come up from Windsor for the day and he, of course, was taking a break from work for his luncheon. I wanted to come back the next day, but it was another three days before I could. But he was there, looking for me."

Ethan's smile warmed her heart. "And you were married not long after that?"

"Yes, much to the chagrin of my parents. They were happy to have me wed a vicar, but they wanted me to stay in Windsor and Jonathan would not leave his parish. Jonathan provided me with years of love, six of them to be exact. The only thing we could not do is have a child together, something I always regretted."

"I am sorry. Did consumption take him?"

She looked over into his eyes, her heart rate rising. “Thank you, and yes.”

The carriage rolled to a stop and she looked out at the post office.

“Would you like me to take it, to respect your *modesty*?” The humor in his voice made her cringe.

“Is that a challenge? I can assure you, Ethan, that the one thing I never do is back away from a challenge.” She looked to the door, now open, and the footman waiting outside. She took his hand and alighted, heading into the building with her head held high. She felt Ethan’s presence right behind her. When they were in the building, she headed for counter to purchase a stamp.

Ethan put a coin on the counter before she could get one out of her reticule, and the clerk marked her letter properly, then bade them “good day” as he placed it in a box. When they were back in the carriage Margaret burst into laughter.

“That poor man. He would probably have had a heart seizure if he had known what I wore under the cape.”

Ethan laughed along with her. “Margaret, you are one of a kind, and a very naughty girl. I may have to spank you again because, I must tell you, I am thrilled with the results.”

She felt flush as he leaned toward her. “Shall we go to the museum, or return home?”

“Oh the museum, definitely. I cannot wait to see what the Romans were up to in this area all those years ago.”

“Very well.” He opened the divider panel between the coach and driver. “To the museum.”

“You are serious?”

“Of course. Were you not?”

* * * *

The day had warmed as time progressed, and by the time they were on their way back to the manor, Margaret felt warm, inside and out. Ethan had been very attentive as they viewed the exhibits, keeping his hand on the small of her back. The contact made her body want him more and she knew that tonight she would not be able to sleep until she brought herself to climax, something she had not done in a few months.

Usually the need arose when she had a dream about Jonathan, about him being inside her. Today the need came from a different source, a flesh and blood man who made her want him in the most intimate of ways.

Several times during the day they had laughed and shared private jokes about her partial nudity. Each joke made her feel closer to him, made her want him. She could tell he was still aroused, although the bulge between his legs was less prominent than it had been. What would he think of her, she wondered, if she undid his breeches, clasped her hand around him and stroked him to climax?

It was such a wonderful idea, touching his body like that.

She looked out the window as the carriage made its way along the road, hoping he did not realize what thoughts ran through her mind.

“Tell me, Margaret, about the conversation I overheard between you and Vesta.”

The mention of her charge put a damper on her good mood.

“I failed her, in so many ways.”

“I do not think so.” He stretched his legs out in front of him. “I think most young women wonder about sex, and it is only natural for her to turn to her closest female friend. I am curious, though, as to what you told her. You were talking about self-pleasure, yes?”

She laughed nervously, then nodded. “Vesta is concerned about her marital life with the Duke of Waterford. I tried to ease her nerves.”

“By letting her read your scandalous novel?” His hands were on his hips now and Margaret could not help but wonder where this would lead. They had become very comfortable with each other over the course of the afternoon.

“Yes. She asked me for advice and I told her about *The Duke’s Mistress*. She asked to read it and I agreed. After all she is not a young child, and is about to be wed.”

“True, but we digress. The conversation was about self-pleasure. Tell me, do you indulge in that activity?”

She ran her sweaty palms down the cape and it opened slightly, revealing the thin shift underneath. “That is none of your business.”

“Backing away from the challenge?”

“Challenge? It is not challenging to speak of sex. It is merely not done in polite society.”

His deep chuckle made her nipples tingle. “And we are not in society, are we? It is just you and I. I dare you to answer the question, truthfully.”

She considered lying, but when she opened her mouth, it was as if another person took over. “Yes. I have pleased myself, and I am not ashamed of it.”

“Nor should you be. Do you remember the scene in *The Duke’s Mistress* where she pleases herself while he watches?”

Shock filled her and she opened her mouth wide before clamping it shut and trying to gain control of her senses. “You have read it!”

“Indeed. It is quite entertaining, do you not think? There was one part near the end where—”

“You hypocrite! You and Calvin both, angry because I talked to Vesta about sex, specifically let her read the novel, and here you have read it. And I’m sure he has, too.”

She expected him to look at least a little abashed. Instead he shrugged his shoulders in apparent indifference. “I cannot change the way of the world. If you remember correctly, I stepped in and prevented you from being dismissed. I think I should get a little credit for that.”

“Maybe. I will reserve judgment for a while, though.” She crossed her arms over her chest, hoping her glare made him feel a little of her anger.

“You’ve changed the subject.” His look made her feel naked, not that she was far from it. Even with the cape on, in these closed quarters, she felt more vulnerable than she had all day long. She could not let this happen, no matter how much her body wanted it.

“I have not read it all. Jonathan died before he could procure the entire novel, I did not know how to get hold of it, even if I had thought about it at that time.”

“I imagine you had other things on your mind.” The smile he gave her was not one of pity, and that made her like him just a little more. He straightened up and leaned toward her. “But you do remember the scene I spoke of, because it was in one of the earlier chapters.”

“Ethan, I think...”

“Do you?” His soft words made her body tingle.

“Yes.” Her answer was short. They stared at each other for a long, lingering moment, then he opened the pass-through to the driver’s seat.

“Drive until I tell you otherwise.”

“Yes, milord.”

Ethan slid the panel closed, then turned back to her.

“I have never been with anyone but Jonathan. Ever. Talking is one thing, but...”

He nodded slowly, and when she did not move he dropped to his knees in front of her, his hands going to the ties on the cape. He undid one, then another, and another, and she didn't stop him, her hands clutching the seat. When he was done, he moved the heavy material aside, revealing her “creation” to him.

“You are so beautiful.” He pressed his lips to her cheek. “When you walked into the dining room this morning, it was all I could do not to bend you over the table and take you.”

Margaret shivered, a small groan escaping her lips. “Ethan.”

“Pleasure yourself for me.”

He moved back to his seat, his hand resting on his thigh near the bulge that was once again very prominent. She focused her gaze on it, her mouth feeling as if she were in a desert.

“I am not sure I can do it, Ethan.”

“Shush, do it for me.”

“I cannot.” Heat warmed her face as he moved to sit beside her, his hand resting on her thigh.

“Where is the woman who so brazenly walked into my dining room half-naked?”

“That woman is remembering that she does not like you, especially after last night.”

“Liar. You like me, maybe because of last night. You needed it. Look what it started.”

His hand moved up her thigh, and she squirmed as the need for him grew stronger. “Pleasure yourself.”

“No.”

“Maybe I should do it for you.” Margaret gasped for air as she thought of him touching her, stroking her hard bud. “What is it the Duke says? ‘*Get yourself wet for me?*’”

“Oh Ethan.” She put her hands on her belly, her body winning the fight it waged with her mind.

“So beautiful. I want to see it. Touch your quim, stroke your lips.” She fumbled with the fabric over her knee, cursing herself for not cutting a slit in the front for better access.

“Damnation.” Ethan took hold of the fabric and ripped it easily, exposing her to his gaze.

“No underclothes again. Naughty girl, but oh so delicious.”

She closed her eyes as his hands trailed up her thighs. “May I touch you, Margaret?”

“Yes.” She spread her legs wider, sucking in her breath as his fingers trailed over her mons, his touch as light as air.

“You know what I want, do you not?”

She had a pretty good idea of what he wanted. “To fuck me?”

“Yes, but not now. I want what I said earlier.” He took her hand and guided it toward her quim, then pressed her fingers into her wetness, their groans mixing together to fill the carriage.

He withdrew his hand and Margaret parted her lips, her fingers delving into her soft flesh. His soft murmurs of encouragement excited her beyond imagination as she stroked her folds, her fingers seeking out her bud, which tingled with need.

Ethan nuzzled her neck while her fingers caressed her nub, rapture spreading through her as her orgasm began, spreading through her body quickly.

“I knew you would be this way, willing to allow yourself to feel pleasure.” Ethan’s breath was hot on her neck; it only increased the desire she felt. “Do you know the first time I dreamt of you? Of seeing you naked and ready for me?”

She shook her head as her fingers continued to work, a second climax building. His strong hands fondled her, moving from her stomach up to her breasts, fondling her nipples until she cried out with need.

“Please, Ethan, I need you, want you.”

“Don’t you want to know the answer to my question?” He nibbled on her ear, his bite gentle yet firm.

“When?”

“The first time I saw you. You were sitting with Vesta in the dining room, and you laughed. Your eyes were filled with intelligence, and as you breathed, your breasts rose and fell so seductively. I wanted you so much, but I never thought to get the chance.”

Margaret gave him what she hoped was a seductive look, peering at him through lowered lashes and licking her lips. “That would mean you were not like the Duke. When he found his Mistress, he took what he wanted.”

“Tempting, but I like a willing woman, one who comes to me because she wants me as badly as I want her.” His hand moved down between her legs, resting on top of hers, their fingers entwining as his found her clit, pressing gently. “Have I found that woman?”

Bliss spread through her as he rubbed, his other hand now behind her neck, massaging tenderly. “Yes, you have.” She trailed her fingers up his thighs, lifting her gaze to his until their eyes were level. The heat emanating from his made her blood heat.

She wanted to touch him, feel his thickness in her hands. “May I?” Her breathing was so loud she felt as if the word was barely heard. But his muttered, “God yes,” let her know it was.

Her slick fingers worked quickly to undo his breeches, and when his hardness sprang free she murmured her approval.

“So hard, so thick. Ethan, I...” She wrapped her fingers around him, savoring his deep groan. “Now I get to make you climax.” She leaned in, kissed the edge of his mouth as she stroked him base to tip and back. His cock throbbed in her fist, and she stopped, trailing her fingers over the tip, teasing the slit.

“Tease.” He gazed at her and she ran her tongue over her lower lip. She wanted to watch his face as he peaked, see the delight in his eyes as his seed erupted from his body. She grasped him again, stroking slowly and then building up as their gazes remained on each other. When he was close his eyelids drooped several times, and he muttered, “Holy hell, yes,” until he thrust his hips at her and she felt the warmth of his seed spread across her hand.

She massaged his length as his climax ran through him, delighting in the feel of him in her hand. “Delicious,” she whispered right before he clasped her face between his hand and claimed her lips, his kiss demanding.

He nibbled on her lower lip, then laid his head against the cushion. “Now that we have broken the ice, what say you we do this properly, and go to bed?”

“Most definitely, Ethan.” He rapped on the ceiling and the carriage slowed, then turned.

“He knows what we have been doing,” she said shyly.

“More than likely,” Ethan replied. “But he is well trained and will not say a word. Not that it will be a secret in the household. Does that bother you?”

“No.” And truthfully it did not.

“You are a naughty woman, Mrs. Compton. And it thrills me to no end.”

“Why Lord Ethan, I believe that is the nicest thing you have ever said to me. Now, take me inside and well...take me.”

Chapter Seven

She expected him to go to her bedroom, where he could leave after they made love. Instead he took her to his, closing the door behind them and standing behind her, pushing the cloak from her shoulders. His lips went immediately to her shoulders, kissing her over the shift.

“That feels wonderful,” she whispered.

“You taste wonderful,” he replied, running his tongue over her collarbone. “I want to do a thousand things at once and cannot decide exactly where to start.”

“It seems to me as if you have picked a perfect spot.” She shivered as he caressed her arms, his lips still claiming hers.

“We need to get rid of this shift.” She opened her mouth to answer, then gasped when he grasped it between his hands and ripped the flimsy garment straight down the back to where it met with the corset. It was ruined anyway, and the show of force excited her more than she thought it should. It was a deliciously erotic idea, and when he stood in front of her and ripped that front the same way, exposing her breasts, her chest heaved with excitement.

He looked her over then he pulled her into his arms and lowered his mouth to her breast. She relaxed into his arms as his lips and tongue worked her nipple, making the already hard nub stiffen even more. His free hand found her other orb, his fingers rolling over her nipple until she gasped out his name.

“Please, let us...”

“Not yet,” he said, lifting his head from her breast. “I want to see you melting into a puddle before me first.”

She nodded slowly, her senses reeling from his touch. Her hands went to the laces of her corset but he still them, grabbing her fingers and pulling them away. “Leave it, I find it rather appealing.”

He pushed aside the remnants of her skirt and cupped the mons, his fingers slipping inside easily. “Tell me what you want, Margaret.”

She didn't hesitate with her answer. "I want you inside me."

"What would you like inside you, Margaret? My fingers? My tongue? My prick?"

A wide grin spread across her face. "Yes."

"Good." He scooped her up in his arms and carried her to the bed as if she weighed nothing, dropping her in the center. She bounced on the soft mattress, watching as he peeled off his jacket, letting it fall to the floor. His fingers moved like lightning as piece after piece of clothing joined the jacket. She watched intently as his broad chest came into view, loving the sight of the slight gathering of hair near his navel that trailed down into his breeches.

She wanted to touch him again, wrap her hands around him and feel him pulse under the pressure. But she also wanted to feel him inside her, thrusting until they both slid down into the oblivion of bliss.

The mattress dipped as he climbed above her, putting his hands on either side of her shoulders. "Lie back."

She ran her fingers up his bare sides as she complied with his request. "Are you going to ravish me?"

"I am." He was kissing her neck now, his tongue coming out to lick every few seconds. "In a few moments, you will not remember your name, much less be able to form a coherent sentence."

"That is a tall order to fill."

The look he gave her left her no doubt he could do exactly as he said.

"We shall see." His lips moved down her body, nipping at her breasts, licking her nipples. She shivered and groaned as his hands slide over the corset, pressing the fabric down into her skin. He nipped at her stomach where the material met skin, then dipped his tongue into her navel, the tickling sensation causing her to cry out

"Stay on your back, Margaret, or I will be forced to secure your compliance in another way."

"How will you do that?" Was that breathy voice hers? Perhaps he was right about her not being able to speak when he was done, because doing so even now seemed very difficult.

"The strips of your shift would make perfect ties." He licked down her belly, pausing at the juncture of her thighs. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, Ethan."

“Good girl.” He resumed his delicious torture, sliding his tongue around her mons and over the juncture of her thighs, his hands now pressed against her knees. “Open for me.”

She complied immediately, gazing down to where he studied her quim. She lifted her hips when his hands trailed down her thighs, his fingers spreading her outer lips and dipping inside.

He ran a finger through her folds, starting at her clit and ending at her opening, pushing inside her gently. Her body cried out for more, and when he added another finger she rocked to one side, clutching the bedclothes as she pressed down to try and increase the pressure.

“Ethan, please take me.”

His tongue slid up her folds, flicking back and forth until she thought she would die from the pleasure, and then his mouth found her clit, sucking it into his mouth and holding it tight as his tongue continued its flicking motion, sending sensations through her body unlike anything she had ever felt before.

Strong fingers pumped her as his tongue worked, and when she cried out in release she was not sure if she said his name, begged for him to take her, or simply made unintelligible whimpering sounds. Her body felt drained of all energy as he placed himself over her, his fingers going to his mouth.

“Delicious,” he murmured around them as he licked the essence of her into his mouth. She bent her legs at the knees, clutching him tightly.

“Please.”

“With pleasure, sweet Margaret.” He pressed the tip of his prick against her opening, sliding inside her easily.

She cried out from the intrusion. His cock was much thicker than his fingers, and her body was no longer unused to having a cock inside her. Still, when he stopped, she undulated under him, encouraging him to give her more, fill her completely.

Ethan fed her a few inches at a time, stopping when she would moan softly, giving her time to adjust to the fullness. When he was inside her, she put her hands on his chest, gazing up into deep blue eyes full of passion.

“Fuck me,” she whispered, remembering the scene in the novel where the Mistress had made just such a demand of the Duke. Fire seemed to grow in Ethan’s eyes, and then he began to thrust, each movement harder than the last.

She clutched him between her legs, wrapping her feet around each other behind him as she held him close. This time the guttural moans came from him as he pounded into her. The movement was the most delicious thing she had felt in quite some time, and Margaret gave herself up to him, licking and nipping at his bare shoulder as he rode her.

“Oh hells a fire...Margaret.” His groans were deep and loud as he emptied himself inside her. She felt his prick pulse, felt his warm fluid fill her. She knew she should worry about the possibility of making a child, but right now she wanted nothing more than to stay with him, to keep him contained in her body for as long as possible.

His arms trembled from exertion as he tried to keep from putting all his weight on her body.

“It is all right, Ethan. You will not hurt me. Give me all of you.” His weight was comforting, and it felt as if the two of them were joined together, one body instead of two. After a few long moments, he rolled to the side and Margaret felt a loss that burned deep inside her soul. She started to leave the bed, but he grabbed her arm, his grip firm.

“Do not leave me, Margaret. Stay with me.” She lay back down, nuzzling against his neck as he wrapped his arm around her. She put her hand on his chest, the rapid beat of his heart giving her comfort. With her head on his shoulder, she felt the instant he fell asleep. She tried to stay awake, wanting to watch him as he slept, but sleep took her moments after it had him.

Sometime during the night she felt him move, felt him shift the two of them so that they were under the bedclothes. Then he took her back in his arms and kissed her forehead. The last thought she had was how wonderful it would be to make love with him first thing in the morning.

Chapter Eight

Margaret stretched her arms above her head, grasping the headboard and pointing her toes toward the far wall. She arched her back and let out a satisfied sigh.

“Feel better?” She glanced up at Ethan, who stood leaning against the bedpost.

“It feels good to stretch, yes. I am a little sore.”

“Are you? Well, I was hoping we could repeat last night’s performance. But if you are sore...”

“Last night, or the night before that? The nights have seemed to blend into one long, fantastic lovemaking session.”

He moved toward her, sleek as a cat. “I am very happy you put the word fantastic in there. Otherwise I might think you were complaining, and I would have to do something to rectify the situation.”

She snuggled down under the blanket. “Do you plan on keeping me in bed forever?”

“I have thought about it, and the idea holds merit.” He sat down next to her, tracing his fingers up and down her forearm. “But I think the staff might be a little scandalized.”

Her laughter filled the room. “If they have not deduced what has happened by now, they never will. Every one of them knows I am in your bed.”

“Yes, they do.” He leaned over and kissed her, his lips lingering on hers. Margaret breathed him in, losing herself in his touch. “As much as I would like to stay here and take you again, we have plans for the evening.”

“We do?” She studied his face carefully but could not detect a hint of deception. “Are we going somewhere?”

“We are. A friend of mine is hosting a party and I promised him we would stop by.”

“I guess I will have to find something suitable to wear. I did not have time to pack a great deal of my clothing.” His smile was wicked and she cocked her head. “What are you up to?”

“Yes, well I took care of the clothing problem. I am afraid I stole one of your old dresses and took it to a seamstress. She used it to fit a new dress to your size, and I paid a little extra for a new dress to be ready tonight.”

“You should not have done that.” She pulled the blanket up a little higher on her chest.

“Why not?”

She knew what she wanted to say, but the words were stuck, unwilling to pass into the air. She cleared her throat, hoping it would make it easier, then finally sat up, holding the bedding to cover her nakedness.

“Because, doing things like that make me seem like your mistress.” She held up a hand to stop him from protesting. “I promised myself I would not allow that to happen. Making love with you is one thing, but taking gifts is another.”

A soft chuckle escaped his lips. “Then I will send the bill to Calvin. After all, you are still in his employ and are staying at my home as a courtesy. I think it only right that he pay to outfit you to accompany me to the party. Will that be agreeable to you?”

“What if he does not pay?”

“He will pay.” Ethan ran a finger up her arm and she licked her lips. “Keep doing that and we will forgo the party all together and see what we can do about discovering some new positions for lovemaking. Spending another night in bed with you sounds like a fantastic plan.”

Heat spread through her face at his suggestion. “I think we have already discovered quite a few that work very well.” She tugged the cover up a little more. “What will we tell people?”

He shrugged. “Well, if we must, I will tell them I like taking you from behind. I seem to go in deeper that way, and your quim feels so delicious when I am inside, and you are on your hands and knees. But, if you prefer...”

“Ethan, I am speaking of tonight. What will we tell your friends? That I, an unmarried woman, am staying at your home without a chaperone? They will know we are lovers.” Margaret studied his face and could see absolutely no fear of what would happen. “Does that not bother you?”

“No.” He leaned over and kissed her shoulder. “Margaret, I will not lie to them and tell them you are a distant cousin.”

“I suppose we could always tell them I have been banished here by my employer for letting my charge read about sex.”

“And I suppose we do not have to explain ourselves at all. I tell them you are my guest, and if they ask for more details, I will say it is none of their affair. It is very easy.”

She gave him an indulgent smile. “And tomorrow, when your father finds out you have me staying in your house? What will you say then?”

“My father would be impressed that I have a woman here. He has been trying to get me to marry for years.”

Margaret made a choking sound, then stared at him. “When he realizes I am not of your station he may not be so impressed.”

“Is that what you are worried about, people thinking you are beneath me?”

“Yes.” She drew her knees up close, resting her head on them. “Ethan, I may come from landed gentry, and my family is not poor, but we are not members of high society. Your father is a Duke. What is between us can go no further than where it is right now, and me accompanying you to a party tonight lets others know that...I am your mistress.”

“Nonsense. A man does not take his mistress to a party. She stays home for the entertainment he wants afterward.” He stood, then wiggled his eyebrows and licked his lips in a lascivious manner. “You are worrying too much. Come and see the dress. It is a beautiful peach color that will go perfectly with your hair.”

Ethan tugged on the covers and she let go, standing up beside him. He put his arms around her and kissed her, the contact gentle, and she knew, meant to be reassuring. “When we come home we will indulge in some of that entertainment.”

“Or we could stay home and have more time to enjoy ourselves.”

He caressed her cheek, shaking his head slowly. “I have a strong desire to see you at a table, surrounded by people, knowing you are not wearing any pantalets under your dress. That you are naked, and I could reach out and touch your quim with a few simple movements.”

“Ethan, you are incorrigible.”

“I prefer to think of it as hopelessly enamored with you.” This time his kiss was demanding, his tongue seeking a home inside her mouth, moving around slowly as if to explore every little nook. “You are a minx, Margaret, and I am not sure I will be able to let you go back to Vesta at the end of three months.”

“You must, you know that. But the memories will be most pleasant.” She ducked under his arm and headed for the door, pausing and turning to him when she grasped the handle. “I hope you bought a new shift, too. I only have one left after my redesign efforts.”

“A shift, corset, and new stockings with ribbons to match the dress. It is a complete ensemble. There are even peach slippers.”

“Thank you.”

“Do not thank me, remember? Thank Calvin. He is the one who will pay for it.” There was a short pause. “Margaret?”

“Yes?” She paused with her hand on the door.

“You might want to cover your body before stepping into the hallway.”

She gasped, her eyes widening. “Yes, you are right. Thank you.”

“My pleasure would be to see you remain naked, but for the sake of Mr. Hathaway’s heart, I think a covering would be for the best right now.”

* * * *

“And what did you say your father did, Mrs. Compton?”

She turned to the man sitting next to her and tried once again to remember his name. Questions like this were exactly what she had hoped to avoid tonight. This man, Lord what’s-his-name, had probably never lifted a finger to do an ounce of work in his life. Once he heard her family were little more than farmers, he would surely try and claim another seat at the table, away from the riffraff.

“Her family owns land, near Windsor, Charles,” Ethan said from across the table. “They farm it and make an honest living, unlike some of us.”

Laughter greeted his words and Margaret smiled at him, receiving a wink in response. She counted her blessings that he was seated across from her and not down the table. The gathering was small, about twenty people, and that was to her liking. She was sure Ethan could handle anything these people might say, whereas she would have to fight the urge to dump her wine glass on them if they said something disparaging.

She knew, though, that every person at the table suspected—rightfully so—that she and Ethan were lovers. While the information made her feel vulnerable at first, it obviously did not bother him, and that gave her strength. If he was not ashamed of bringing her to this event, she

should not feel guilty about being here. After all, she had never been embarrassed by anything in her life. Why should she start now?

“And how is that you met our Ethan, if you are from Windsor?” The woman sitting next to Ethan, Lady Perry, smiled at her. Margaret could see she was not jealous, merely curious.

“We have mutual friends,” Margaret replied. “In London. That is where I lived with my husband before he died, and I stayed there after he passed.” No need to say Ethan had rescued her after her employer threatened to throw her out on her bum for showing his sister a book about sex.

“London is a fine city,” Charles said. “I truly love the park there. So many wonderful things to see.”

The conversation turned to things they could do in London compared to the things available in Bath. Margaret listened with one ear as she studied Ethan, who laughed and spoke with the ease he seemed to show in every situation. He was a man who was comfortable everywhere, and she wished there was a chance they could be more than lovers. That was impossible, though. He might accept her, and joke about his father being happy she was in his bed, but being a lover was one thing, and being a wife was another.

She took a sip from her wineglass, trying to clear her thoughts. Why had they gone in that direction? She knew it would lead to nothing but heartache. Still, she had dealt with the pain of losing Jonathan, and he had been her husband. She would learn to live without Ethan when the time came.

A look across the table showed he now studied her with great interest and she could only surmise he was thinking about the fact she wore nothing beneath her skirts. Would they play in the carriage on the way back, or would he have something else in mind, something that would prove equally exciting?

Her body was sore from their numerous encounters from the previous evenings, but she still wanted to make love tonight, to feel him inside her. Each time they joined was one more memory she could take with her when she returned to London. She could use them to fuel the many self-pleasuring sessions she was sure to have when they were apart and she thought about him.

Stop that, Margaret! Stay in the present and do not stray into the future. Worry about that when the time comes.

She had learned that when Jonathan died. She had spent days afterward worrying about what would happen. Then she decided it was best to pick herself up and move forward, and that was when she sought employment as a companion. That situation had led her to Ethan, and for that she was eternally grateful, even if it would not be forever.

“Mrs. Compton, I wonder where your mind is?” She jerked suddenly and looked into the laughing gaze of Charles, her dinner companion.

“Excuse me?”

“You seem to be a million miles away. Lady Siston just announced the end of dinner, and we are adjourning to the salon for a musical performance.” He stood and helped her with her chair, bowing slightly before going around her.

Ethan was beside her immediately, taking her hand in his gently and steering her to fall in behind the others.

“Tell me, Margaret, were you thinking about my prick?” He whispered the words in her ear and her body quivered with the idea of taking him inside her right here, right now.

“I am now.”

“Good. Make sure you do not lose that thought because I have great plans for us later.”

“Then we should leave now and put your plan into motion.”

“Tsk-tsk, Margaret,” Ethan said as they moved into the salon. “Good things come to those who wait, my dear. You will see.”

Chapter Nine

“It is a little dark for the park, is it not?” Margaret took Ethan’s hand as he helped her alight from the carriage.

“Is it?” He looked around. “I had not noticed.”

She returned his smile, then giggled. “What are you doing?”

“When we were here the other day, I am afraid I was a bit distracted by a half-naked woman sitting next to me. Tonight, I thought we would examine the River Avon. There is a lovely bridge a ways down the park.”

He put his hand on the small of her back, urging her toward the river. Margaret walked slowly, admiring what little she could see of the park. The stars twinkling overhead provided some illumination, but the moon was just a sliver.

“It is almost a new moon,” she said softly. “It keeps the night very dark.”

“Yes, it does.” He brought her hand to his lips. “How is it you know of moon phases?”

“What, do you think because I did not attend a fancy school that I know nothing? My father is a farmer, Ethan. He knows of the earth and the moon and everything in between. Not that there is much in between.”

“And he taught you.” They stepped onto the bridge and she nodded, running her hand alongside the railing.

“Yes. I went to school, and he made sure I finished all the grades I could. I was always thirsty for knowledge, which is why I went to the museum where I met Jonathan. That thirst for information comes from my father, and Jonathan fueled it.”

He pulled her to a stop in the center of the bridge, placing her so that she faced the water. He stepped up behind her, putting his hands on her hips.

“You cannot possibly think we can—”

“I can think it, and I know we will. Making love near the water, under the stars. Very romantic, do you not think?”

“What if someone comes along?” Excitement ran through her. This was unlike anything she had ever done, and she knew the chances of someone passing this way at this time of night were slim. Still, they were there nonetheless.

His lips were on her neck, kissing a trail along her neckline.

“Ethan, you did not answer my question.”

He continued to kiss her as his hands left her body. She could feel him undoing the stays of his breeches and she exhaled softly at the contact with her bottom, even if there was material between them. When he clasped her hips and pulled her back into his body she could feel the length of his cock riding against her.

“Ethan.”

“Are you still worried about someone watching?”

For an answer, she gathered her skirts in her hands, inching them up slowly.

“What a beautiful sight,” he whispered. “Bring them all the way up, bare yourself to me.”

When her backside was bare, he pressed against her and she clasped the railing with one hand, holding the skirt up with the other. Her quim flooded with heat and wetness as he cupped her bum, squeezing gently. She bent so that her stomach rested against the railing, and spread her legs.

Ethan caressed her bottom, then moved a hand between her legs, his thumb sliding inside her easily as his fingers played around her folds, seeking her clit. “I love that you are always ready for me.” His voice felt like fairy kisses against her neck. “It is as if your quim was made for my cock, made for my hands.”

She gasped as he found her clit, rubbing it between two fingers until she rocked into his touch. His thumb slid in and out slowly as he caressed her. Margaret could feel her orgasm building, knew all it would take was a sharp tug on her clit before she spent.

“Take me, Ethan, I want you inside me when I climax.”

“I am inside you. Or is there something more specific you want?” His thumb made a circular motion, rubbing around the walls of her quim, the feeling sensual and naughty.

“Your prick,” she whispered, barely in control of her voice. “Please.”

“Yes? My prick?” He paused, then licked her earlobe before whispering, “What about it?”

“Ethan put your prick in me now. Please.” She knew her tone was too loud, knew people who might be walking nearby might have heard her, but she did not care. All she wanted right now was for his hard cock to slide inside her.

“My naughty Margaret.” He withdrew his thumb and took a step back, putting his hands back on her hips. “Do you really want me?”

Margaret could barely say the word yes, but she hoped her emphatic nod got her point across.

“Then take me, Margaret, move yourself back onto my cock.” She thrust her hips back at him, trying desperately to find his cock. She cried out in frustration when she could not make contact with him. “Shush, little one. Take it slow and you will find your reward. Remember what I said: good things come to those who wait.”

The railing felt cold and hard as she grasped it, trying to keep herself from ramming back into him. She could hear her own breathing, heavy and ragged as she followed his directions, moving slowly, each inch making her ache all the more to have him inside her.

When she felt the tip of him nudge against her wetness she groaned in triumph, then pushed back slowly. He pierced her folds, the feeling intense.

“Good. You control this, Margaret. Tonight I will stand here while *you* fuck *me*.”

The proposition made her stomach lurch in anticipation and she pushed herself further into him, keeping up the movement until he filled her completely.

True to his word, he did not move and she wondered at his discipline, for there was no way she could stand still while he pulsed inside her. She rocked back and forth, slowly at first and then faster, his cock sliding in and out of her wetness. Each time he plunged into her she felt him deep, almost as if he could travel straight up her body into her heart. She moved one hand from the railing to her clit, stroking it with each thrust.

She went over the edge in seconds, her muscles clenching around Ethan and holding him inside her as she rode the waves of passion. When the sensations started to fade she moved again, slowly, taking him in and out of her in inches. She could feel his tension, knew it was taking everything he had to stay still and not grasp her hips and thrust himself into her until he flooded her.

Margaret continued her slow movements until she heard a moan, which sounded like a plea, emerge from his mouth. Then she thrust herself back, increasing the pace until she heard his cry of release, felt him throb inside her. She looked down into the waters, then up at the stars.

“Ethan?”

“Yes, my sweet?” He was laying against her back now, his weight heavy and reassuring.

“Thank you. That was incredible.”

“You did all the work, so it is I who should be thanking you.” He stepped back and helped her stand upright. Her skirts fell into place as he worked on his breeches. “Let us go home now and play in the gardens, shall we? It is a beautiful night. I can bring out a blanket and we can make love under the stars for as long as we both like.”

“It sounds like perfection.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him, savoring the taste of wine that lingered from dinner.

They walked back to the carriage and climbed inside, sitting on a seat together, his arms wrapped around her.

“I want to keep you forever, Margaret.”

“I told you I would not be any man’s mistress.” There was no anger behind her words, only resignation. “If I could, I would stay with you forever, Ethan, as you want me to. But society would deem it wrong.”

“To hell with them.” Before she could respond he put his finger to her lips. “I will convince you that we belong together, I can guarantee it.”

She did not reply, knowing it would probably not do her any good. Instead she nestled against him, loving the feel of his hard body next to hers as they traveled the distance to his home.

As they pulled to the gate, the pass-through from the driver slid open. “Milord, there is a carriage at the house.”

Ethan leaned forward to look out the window as they pulled up alongside the carriage that had not been here when they left. “It has Waterford’s seal on it.”

“Vesta!” Margaret smiled deeply. “He has brought her to see us.”

She hurried to step down from the carriage door before it had come to a full stop, ignoring Ethan’s calls to wait for him. She burst through the front door, calling Vesta’s name.

Ethan came up behind her just as she entered the drawing room. Richmond and Waterford sat on opposite couches and stood when she entered.

“Your Grace, Lord Melbrook.” She curtsied. “Where is Vesta?”

“That is what I would like to know,” Waterford said, gazing first at Melbrook and then at her. “It seems my intended decided to take a little trip, although she failed to mention her destination in her note. We thought maybe you might know where she has gone. Do you?”

“No.” Fear ran through Margaret as the import of his words sank in. Vesta was gone, and no one knew where she was.

“We have already questioned the staff and she was not here tonight,” Melbrook said to Ethan. The thunderous look on his face let her know he blamed her for what was happening. “She has to be somewhere close by because she told me just yesterday how much she missed seeing Margaret, and how their separation was my fault.”

“Did she take a carriage?” Ethan stepped next to her and she clasped his hand, grateful when he didn’t pull away.

“We found a hansom driver who said he delivered her to Victoria Station,” Melbrook replied. “But no one there can remember where she went, or if she even bought a ticket. She could be here, or in London.”

Waterford stepped closer and Margaret was reminded of what a large man he was, towering above both the other men in the room. “Any information you can think of to help in our search would be appreciated, Mrs. Compton. Perhaps we should sit down and discuss Vesta’s state of mind before she decided to take flight. That might turn up information we can use.”

Margaret turned her gaze to Ethan, who looked down at her. She could tell by the look on his face that he was wondering the same thing she was: how much Calvin had told the Duke about what happened, and how should they go about finding her missing charge?

19 August, 1880

My last letter is barely on its way to you, and yet I find myself writing another. I found out what he means by total possession. Did you know, dear cousin, that a man's mouth can bring you great pleasure when it is placed on your cunny? Of course this little piece of information came with another bit that made me take pause and wonder what I was doing. But I will tell you more about that later.

His Grace was unable to attend me today, but he sent a note telling me to accept the invitation to a crush at The Duchess of _____'s house. Along with the note came a new dress, which fit me as if I had posed for the fittings myself. It is blue in color, and cut just a little lower in front than the current style recommends, but I am sure it will please His Grace to see me wear it tonight.

My friend _____ was attending the party, and although I had begged off earlier I sent her a note to let her know I had reconsidered. She herself is a mistress, although her lover is a married man and cannot attend to her as mine does. She does not know about His Grace, or at least I think she does not, and I do not want her to know.

We arrived at the party fashionably late. The Duchess greeted us with open arms and I wondered if she knew of our lovers. Is there some secret way that the upper members of society know when one of their number has taken a new mistress? She was very kind in greeting us, which was nice. After all we are at the lower levels of society, are we not?

I found my lover almost at once, almost as if he had been watching for me. He stood near the stairs, talking to our host, the Earl of _____. I nodded demurely in his direction before turning my gaze elsewhere in case someone would catch me attending too much to him. When I looked back there was a smile on his face. He lifted his gaze toward the stairs and I caught his signal immediately. I was to go up to the second floor and wait for him.

I wove my way through the crowd, acknowledging those I knew, admiring gowns and asking about relatives and friends I had not seen for a while. When I reached the top of the stairs a houseboy bowed to me, indicating that I should follow him. When I told him there must be a mistake he just smiled.

“You are Melody?” I nodded and said there was no mistake. I showed me to a room, then shut the door behind me. It was a library of some sort, with large shelves filled with books. I have always enjoyed the written word, as you know, and thought to examine a few of the titles but the room was dark, lit only by a single candle on the table.

Before I could move toward them, however, the door opened and His Grace came in. He closed the door and leaned against it.

“Melody.”

“My Lord.” I curtsied, which always makes him laugh.

“Lie on the table and lift your skirts.” Did I mention, sweet cousin, that the note he sent me this morning warned me against wearing pantalets under my dress? Well, it was a surprise to me, too. I walked to the table, seeing a large piece of fabric there.

“For you to lie on, so your juices do not stain your skirt.” I arranged myself as he asked, making sure my skirts were lifted above my hips. There would be wrinkles but no stains. The lower part of my legs hung off the table, the edge of the wood hitting my knees.

“Do I need to move down? Will this position be awkward for you?”

“Not for what I have in mind.” And he leaned over and put his mouth on me. The feeling was incredible and I inhaled sharply, my hips shooting off the table into his mouth. He grasped my hips, holding them close as his tongue parted my lips and dove into my wet folds. It is hard to describe the feeling, a strange mixture of panic from the idea of what was happening and the extreme pleasure his tongue brought me as it traveled around my cunny, licking me from my clit to my opening and back again.

I was so absorbed in what was happening that it took me a long while to notice a man standing in the corner. Did I mention the bit of information that made me take pause? This was it. It was our host, the Earl of _____. He has his prick in his hand, working it back and forth as he watched His Grace feast on my cunt.

I tried to sit up but His Grace stopped, fixed a hard stare on me. “You will obey,” he whispered, reminding me now that I was his, that he owned me. I had let him lay claim on my body the first night we met, had given him control. I lay back, embarrassment flooding me as His Grace went back to work on my cunt. I could tell from the sounds I heard that they were both working their cocks now.

When our host prepared to spend he pulled a linen square from his pocket, held it close. I should have looked away but I could not. His cock was as thick as His Grace's, but not quite as long. I watched a stream of his seed erupt from the tip. He caught it in the kerchief as he groaned his pleasure. He produced a few more streams and I watched in fascination.

The sounds from below stopped and His Grace pulled me toward him, entering me quickly.

"Fuck her," our host said as he refastened himself inside his breeches. His gaze was trained on where His Grace's prick slammed in and out of me. When the Earl of _____'s hand went to my cunt I tried to grab at him, but His Grace captured my hands, holding me tight while his friend played with my clit.

I am ashamed to say, dear cousin that I spent. The feeling was incredible, and the sensations stronger than anything I have ever felt. Our host continued to play with my clitoris while His Grace fucked me. When my lover spent our host leaned over and kissed my forehead, then quit the room.

"How could you?"

He stepped away from me, wiping his prick with a cloth.

"You are mine, Melody. I will do with you as I like. But you enjoyed it."

I wanted to scream at him, to tell him no, that I was not his. But I know it is the truth. The strength of my climax shows how much I enjoyed it. I am a whore. His whore.

"Next time I am going to let him fuck you." His words shocked me, and thrilled me at the same time. "I will watch while he rides you, his prick sliding in and out of your cunt."

His clothing was back where it should be now and he stepped to the table, pulling me into an embrace. He kissed my forehead, then whispered, "You will fuck him for me, will you not?"

I wanted to say no but the words would not come. Instead I nodded as he held me close. What is it about this man that makes me do these things? It is something I never would have allowed with my husband. He was a sweet man, and never would have set up a scenario like the one that played itself out tonight.

I have gone from being a mistress to a whore. How does that happen? I am considering writing him a letter after I finish this one, telling him I have changed my mind. But I know I will not. I will stay with him; I will enjoy the situations he creates for us.

I am sorry, dear cousin. I will understand if you do not want me to correspond with you after you read this. Please forgive me, and forgive and my weak body.

I close for now, with much love to you. I need some time to think, to examine what has become of me, and whether or not I like it.

I remain your affectionate cousin,

The Duke's Whore

Part III

The Not So Wayward Duchess

Chapter Ten

Vesta stared over the railing at the crowd below. It was just after noon and the Roman Baths teemed with people. She studied them all, the women and their friends, and the families with small children. They all seemed so normal, and they all seemed to be having a good time.

She herself felt pretty normal at the moment. No one was breathing down her neck, asking where she was going and what she was doing. Best of all, she would see Margaret in a short amount of time.

By now the post had delivered the missive she had send yesterday afternoon, telling Margaret she was in Bath and wanted to see her today. She had been specific about the time for their meeting: one o'clock in the Baths, where the crowds would be heavy and Vesta would get a taste of what it was like to visit someplace on her own.

Getting here had been easier than she thought it would be. She had been sure to wear a casual day dress when she had gone to the transport station. She did not want any attention of the like they had received in the penny gaff, with someone realizing she was a woman of station and attempting to steal her reticule.

Buying a ticket had been easy. She simply went into Calvin's office once he had left for the day, taking money from the drawer. She did not look upon it as stealing. After all, the money was hers and Calvin just gave it to her when he thought she needed it. She felt she needed it, so she had taken the whole stack, more than three hundred pounds. She then proceeded to her room, put some of the money inside her slipper so that if something did happen to her reticule she would not be without funds, and packed a small bag with one other dress and a few other items she thought she would need for the short trip.

After that she had gone to the balcony outside her room, which overlooked the gardens, and dropped the bag down into the bushes. She told Mr. Meyers she was going to take the morning air in the gardens, then picked up her bag and exited by the side gate.

She found a driver willing to take her to Victoria where she caught the train to Bath. Watching the people at the station had been fascinating, and she had almost missed her departure time. Once in Bath, she secured a room at an Inn then dined in the main salon, once again watching the people intently.

And now here she was, waiting for Margaret. She could not wait to see her friend again. It really was terrible of Calvin to send her away. But at least she knew Margaret was with Ethan. Vesta had thought about writing a letter to discuss the situation at hand, but did not want to wait for the post to run its course.

That left her with only one option: to come to Bath, meet, and then go back to London. The Duke had been called out of town—again—so she did not have to worry about him showing up unannounced. She thought with any luck that Calvin would spend most of his time with Lady Morset, something that happened more and more often lately.

It was just terrific, she thought to herself as she waited. Calvin had a female friend who obviously adored him, and Vesta could not even get the Duke to kiss her. She had tried to leave hints after the theater performance they had attended two nights ago, lifting her face toward his in what she thought would be an open invitation to kiss her lips.

Instead he had kissed her forehead when they had arrived at her home, and told her he would be gone for a few days. That meant he would probably be back tomorrow, which would not pose a problem. Vesta would visit with Margaret then go back to London tonight. She would face Calvin's wrath, to be sure, but he would calm down eventually. And if he were too aggressive in his anger, she would tell him that if he were not careful she would break her engagement. She knew he would not do anything to put the engagement in jeopardy.

Vesta just did not understand what was wrong with her. Why would the Duke not kiss her? Did he find her distasteful in some way? She did not think so. If that were the case he would not have offered for her hand in marriage. Perhaps he found her clothing not to his liking. When they married, would he demand that she dress in more somber colors? Would he make her wear her hair up all the time?

The idea that she would have absolutely no control over such things made her heart ache. At least with Calvin she was able to control her dress. With the Duke she thought things might change.

She glanced around, wondering what was taking Margaret so long. Or maybe she had misjudged the post and the letter had not arrived. Surely it would have been delivered by now.

She drummed her fingers against the wood, then jumped when a deep, masculine voice called her name.

Vesta turned, and her mouth fell open in surprise. “Your Grace.”

“Good afternoon, Lady Vesta.”

She looked around the Duke of Waterford almost expecting Margaret to materialize out of thin air.

“I am here to collect you and take you out to Lord Ethan’s home.”

Her palms started to sweat and her head to pound. “How did you...?”

“Did you think your absence would go unnoticed? I came home early and wanted to visit with my intended. Instead I find that she has fled and no one knows where she is. Until a few short hours ago.”

“I see.” She swallowed hard, wrapping her fingers around the strap of her reticule. “Then we should...”

“Go, yes. Your brother and the others are expecting us.” He held out his hand and she put hers in it, wondering what would happen next. He led her swiftly through the crowd, and at the front of the building she found his carriage waiting for them. He helped her inside then rapped on the ceiling when the door was shut. The carriage started off and Vesta pasted a smile on her face.

“Answer one question for me, Vesta. Are you running from me, or is it something else?”

“From you? No, Your Grace, I needed to see Margaret, she was...well, my brother, he...”

“Yes, he explained the situation to me. Fully.”

Fully? Did that mean he knew about *The Duke’s Mistress*, her talks with Margaret, and about their trip to the penny gaff? One look at his face told her he knew something, thought perhaps not everything. He did not seem angry, yet no trace of laughter showed in his expression. His look was neutral, and it made her wonder what went on in his mind.

“And you are sure you were not running to escape me? Please be truthful.”

“No, it is not that. I swear it.” She worried the strings on her purse. “You are not concerned that I am compromised? Calvin said you would be angry I that was asking about martial relations, and about my visit to the penny gaff.”

A small smile tugged at his mouth, and her nerves eased a bit. “You are not compromised, at least not to my way of thinking. Unless there is something you have done that I do not know about. Is there?”

“No, Your Grace.”

“Please, Vesta, I have asked you to call me Sterling. We are to be wed, remember?”

How could I forget? “Yes, I remember. Sterling.”

“Thank you.” He leaned toward her, and in the enclosed space, with her nerves stretched tight, he seemed even larger than usual. His shoulders were broad and his green eyes seemed to see straight into her soul.

“I would ask another question, one that I prefer to be just between us. Have you lain with a man, or with a woman, perhaps your companion?”

“Your Grace! She is a woman.”

“Things of that nature are not unheard of, Vesta. I will not judge you if you have done this, you have my word. Please answer the question and be honest with me.”

“No!” Vesta put her hand on her chest. “I swear it; we just talked about...well...sex. I knew nothing of it and I was so curious. She is the only person I could ask.”

He nodded, taking her hands in his. “I imagine you are somewhat fearful of what will happen between us, and I do not want you to be. I would ask that if you have more questions you bring them to me. After all, I will be your husband. I know I have been preoccupied with events at the estate, but that is past now, and I can devote more time to you.”

Warmth spread through her and changed the bleak idea she had of her future to something that had beautiful rays of sunshine in it. “Thank you, Sterling.”

“You are welcome, Vesta. Promise me you will never run off again.”

“Very well, I promise.”

He squeezed her hands, then sat back in his seat. “I do not believe I have ever met a woman quite like you.” His deep chuckle made her smile.

“That is wonderful to hear, and I am afraid Calvin will be so angry with me he will keep me under lock and key until our wedding day.”

“Not if I have anything to do with it.”

She laughed softly. “No offense, Your Grace, but you are not my husband yet. And while your station may be higher than my brother’s, I can assure you I may not see the sun until our

wedding day. I am surprised he let you come alone to collect me from the Baths. Calvin is worried that I will embarrass you in some way, and force you to cancel the wedding.”

“Your brother did indeed fight to come along this afternoon, but Lord Ethan convinced him to let me come alone. He said, as I had proposed, that it would build rapport between us, something that I do not think has been done yet.”

“You are very right, Sterling, it has not. But Calvin will not be dissuaded again. When we are back in London, he will watch me like a hawk. I would be surprised if he would allow me to make a move without him by my side.”

His eyes narrowed as if he was deep in thought, and then he rapped on the ceiling of the carriage. The driver pulled to the side of the road and Sterling opened the pass-through. “Take us to a messenger service.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” The vehicle made a wide turn and Vesta shook her head in confusion.

“We will wed tomorrow, when we arrive at Gretna Green. In between that time and now, you may ask me questions about our martial relations to your heart’s content, and I will be thrilled to answer them for you.”

“Wed? Tomorrow?” Excitement mixed with dread inside of her. On the one hand she would be out of Calvin’s house, something that would make her very happy. On the other hand she would be pushed into married life much earlier than she had anticipated. She would go from one man’s house into another. It was possible she would find herself going from one fire to another, with no chance of rescue.

“But Sterling, I understood you have to be a resident of Scotland now for at least three weeks before a marriage can be performed.”

“Trust me, my dear, with money anything is possible. I will write a note to your brother, and have it delivered at five this afternoon. I will not tell him where we are going, only that when he next sees us, we will be wed. I am sure he will figure out where we have gone, and will take the main road. I will inform our driver to take the back roads, and since we have a good start on him, we can make it there before him.”

He leaned toward her again. “If it pleases you, we will still have a larger wedding in London, on the date we have already set. Would you like that?”

This was a side of her future husband she had never seen before, and it warmed her insides. “Yes, Sterling, I would.”

“Good. Then there will be no question as to the legitimacy of our marriage. I expect members of society will scramble for an invitation so they can see the two of us, already wed once, do it again.”

Vesta put her hands in front of her face and laughed, the sound high and loud. It was obvious that she had misjudged Sterling in the small amount of time she had known him. “We will cause quite a scandal.”

“Does that bother you?”

“No, actually, Sterling, it thrills me as nothing has in a long time.”

Chapter Eleven

Sterling crossed his arms over his chest, stretching his legs out in front of him. “Tell me, Vesta, what were you and your companion talking about that threw your brother into such a fit?”

“You already know.”

The curve of her mouth, coupled with the shocked look on her face, made him smile. “Well, he did tell me that she had, and I quote, ‘introduced you to some of the seedier things in life.’ I thought it would be about sex in general, but from the look on your face earlier, I think it might have been more than that. Which is why I asked you the question I did.”

The blush on her face made her all the more lovely. Her dark hair framed her fair face, and her brown eyes now shone with more than a little trepidation. One of the reasons he had selected her to court was her eyes, which seemed to hold more than a hint of intelligence the first few times he had seen her. He was happy his observation about her had proven correct; she was very smart, and in no way a shrinking violet, something he could not have stood to live with for the rest of his life.

His offer of a Gretna Green marriage had been extended in a hurry, but it was not one he regretted. He knew without a doubt that she was correct about her brother. The man was very image conscious, and there were people in London who would have undoubtedly heard about Vesta’s little stunt. The way servants talk, he was sure it was being passed around at this very moment.

There would be those who thought she had snuck away to spend private time in his bed, and he had no desire to harm her reputation. They had to be wed, and soon. Not that it would be a hardship. It was simply moving things forward a little. And, as she said, it would provide the London ladies with a bit of scandalous gossip they would enjoy bringing up for years to come.

The sound of her voice broke his musings and he tuned his ears back to her.

“I assure you, Sterling, I am untouched.” She looked down at the floor of the carriage, giving him a hint she was lying to him. He would need to get to the bottom of this.

“Then tell me what you spoke of.”

“I wanted to know what happened, and I could not ask my brother. As a widow, Margaret could provide me with all the information I wanted. And she did.”

“So you know what to expect tomorrow night?”

She shifted her gaze to him and her blush intensified. “I have a very good idea, yes. Calvin was furious. He said you would be angry that I knew what a pri... um well...”

“Yes?” When she did not finish her sentence, he traced his fingers along the seat cushion. “Honesty in a marriage is very important, Vesta. My parents, God rest their souls, loved each other very much. My father told me once that it was not so at the beginning, but the more time they spent together the more their infatuation grew. And they told each other everything, no matter what. I would like to set that precedent for our marriage.”

“But we are not yet married.”

“Soon enough. Now finish your sentence. Tell me what you were going to say.”

He tried not to focus on her breasts as she inhaled sharply, then said quickly, “He said you would be angry if you knew I knew what a prick was.”

A smile spread across his face. “Is that what she called it?”

“No, well yes,” another heavy sigh and then she said, “but, that was what was written in...*The Duke's Mistress*.”

He tried to keep his surprise tempered down, but knew he failed by the horrified look on her face.

“I am sorry, Your Grace,” she rushed to say. “If you wish to turn around and break our engagement, I will understand.”

“No, I do not wish to do such a thing. I am shocked, though, that your companion had a copy of that particular work of fiction.”

“I can understand your alarm, but the reasons for it are personal, and I will not break her trust any more than I already have. Suffice it to say, she let me read it—well the five chapters that she had of it—and one morning she and I were discussing a certain, um, part of it, Calvin overheard. He became furious.”

“I have no doubt.” He lowered his head to try to make eye contact with her, since her gaze was still leveled at the floor. “Go on.”

“That was the day you broke our riding engagement. That was the day we went to the penny gaff.”

“I see.”

When she lifted her gaze back to him, there were tears in her eyes. “He was going to discharge her, but I told him if he did I would break our engagement. I believe my brother is ready to be rid of me, so he can marry Lady Morset.”

“Yes, I have heard the rumblings that they are spending a great deal of time together.” He leaned closer to her, ran his thumb under her eye. It came back moist and he gave her a reassuring smile. “I also know your father takes little interest in you and your brother, especially since he has a new wife that is not much older than you are.”

“Yes, well that does not really bother me. He is not a man to pass love on to his children. Heaven help those he creates with his new wife.”

A crack of thunder made Vesta jump and then she laughed nervously. “That was unexpected.”

“Well, we have been traveling for a few hours, and have not looked outside.” He opened the panel. “How bad is the storm?”

“We need to find shelter, Your Grace,” the driver said. “It’s not far from a small town. I think the storm will worsen as the night progresses.”

“Do it, then.”

He turned back to find her staring at him. “Will you get two rooms?” Her question made him laugh.

“As long as you promise not to go out the window, then yes.” Her laughter was like sweet music. “Your brother should be getting my missive right about now, and this storm will keep him from coming after us right away. That will give us even more of a lead.”

“I like that idea.” Her smile was back and it made his cock pulse. It would be hard not to take her tonight, but he would keep hold of himself, waiting for tomorrow when the priest pronounced them wed. He needed something, though, to take his mind off her curvy form, so beautifully contained in her dress.

“I hope we can find an inn with some good food. I do not know about you, Vesta, but I am starving.”

“So am I. It was early when I last ate.”

“Good. We will eat, and then continue our discussion. It has been most illuminating and entertaining.”

More thunder rumbled through the skies, and when she shivered he patted the seat next to him. “Come sit by me. It will not be long before we are indoors and away from the storm.”

She moved beside him immediately and curled into his side, putting her hand on his chest. His cock throbbed harder and he wrapped an arm around her, wondering if it was a good move, or a bad one.

Finally he decided that he did not care. She felt soft in his arms and he was a grown man who could control his urges for one night. Surely it would not be that hard, would it?

Chapter Twelve

Vesta searched through her valise and nibbled on her lower lip. If she had known her trip would be longer than one night, she would have brought more dresses. She definitely would have selected something more appropriate for a wedding.

As it was she would marry in a blue day dress that showed a profusion of wrinkles from being stuffed in a bag for so long. That had not seemed important when she was staying in Bath. But now that she was on the way to Gretna Green...

She sighed and looked around her room at the inn. It was functional, yet sparse. Of course, they were lucky to have found it at all, being situated as it was in a small town off the main road. Several other travelers had stopped because of the storm, which still raged outside, but the innkeeper, upon seeing the Waterford seal on their coach, had been more than accommodating, and immediately found two rooms for them.

Sterling's room was separate from all the others, at the top of the house. Hers was situated in a hall that contained three other rooms, which were all occupied.

By this time tomorrow night she would be the Duchess of Waterford, married in a civil ceremony while on the run from her brother. The idea had a romance about it that thrilled her, and truly she wished she had seen this side of Sterling long before now. It would have saved her from having a talk with Margaret about sex. But then again maybe not. He still had not kissed her.

There had been plenty of time while they were in the carriage, but he had stayed to his side for the most part. He had touched her, yes, and that touch had been and made her senses tingle. But he had not kissed her. She wanted to be kissed.

A loud crack of thunder sounded just as a knock came at the door. She yelped in distress and the door flew open.

"Vesta? Is something wrong?" Waterford stepped inside, looking around the room for any signs of danger.

“The storm—it frightened me.” She fluttered her hand under her chin as she had seen some ladies do when upset. Maybe he would kiss her now.

He entered the room, closing the door behind him, then crossed to the windows, pulling aside the coverings.

“It is a bad one. The roads will be muddy tomorrow.”

She watched as he shook his head, letting her gaze trail down to his breeches in appreciation. *My goodness what a nice, firm bottom. How is it I never noticed before?*

“Do you not agree?”

“I am sorry, what?”

“We should cross to the main road tomorrow. More chance of your brother catching up, but the roads will be in better shape than the back ones.”

“I agree.”

“Excellent.” He turned to her and her mouth went dry. She wanted to ask for a kiss, but how did one do that without seeming too forward, or like a harlot? He was speaking again and, while her gaze remained fastened on his lips, she was not really listening to what he was saying.

“I think it is very polite of him. Of course, I made sure to give him a little extra for it.”

He was smiling at her, the look one of great amusement. “You have not heard a word I just said, have you?”

“Of course, something about extra...” she let the words trail off and shook her head, laughing along with him.

“Come along then, and we will eat in the inn keeper’s private dining room, a privilege for which I will pay him extra.”

“Oh.” She fluttered her hand again. “I am sorry, Sterling. It is just that...” Her gaze strayed to the bed, then back to him.

“You are right, of course. I have put you in a compromising situation by being in here with you alone before we are wed. Perhaps we should have stopped to pick up your companion, although I am not sure Lord Ethan would have allowed her to leave his bed.”

“What?”

“It is quite obvious they are lovers, the way they touch and look at each other.”

Vesta nodded, not sure how she felt about this information. If something had developed between Margaret and Ethan, would her friend want to come live with her once she was married?

“I hoped you would allow Margaret to stay in my employ after our wedding.”

“Something tells me Margaret will be busy with things of her own. I know of Lord Ethan, and the fact she is not of his social standing will not be of concern to him. I would not be surprised if they wed.”

He studied her carefully as she thought about his words. “I thought you would be pleased for your friend.”

“I am, but she is my only friend. If she marries Ethan and stays in Bath, then I will be alone.”

“You will have me, and I hope we will be great friends.”

Warmth spread through her, as it seemed to do a lot since he had found her this afternoon. “I hope so, too. I know my mother was never very happy. My father was indifferent to her, and she spent a great deal of time with her books.”

He stepped closer, tipping her face up to his. Her heart thumped in her chest. *This is it; he is going to kiss me. Right here, right now, and right next to the bed. Maybe he will take it further and touch me somewhere intimate.*

Sterling stroked her cheek with the pad of his thumb. “Remember what I said in the carriage. Honesty is important, and communication. If something is bothering you, at any time during our life together, I want you to tell me about it, and I promise to do the same.”

“Yes, Sterling.” She tipped her face up, offering him her lips. His thumb tickled the edge of them, but he pulled away before pressing his own to them.

“Shall we?” The words trailed behind him as he moved to the door and her shoulders slumped in disappointment. Was there something wrong with her? He seemed as though he was ready to kiss her, yet he had just passed up a perfect opportunity.

Maybe she was doing something wrong. She turned to where he stood in the open doorway, an expectant look on his face. She nodded and followed him to the room where they would dine. The innkeeper had laid out a fine table, with fowl, various breads and vegetables.

The place settings were close together, and two long tapers sat in the center. A roaring fire provided warmth, but Vesta already felt a great deal of heat coming from her body. She knew from her readings she was aroused. She did not want food. She wanted the man standing next to her. Sterling crossed to the table and held out a chair. She sat down gingerly, moaning softly when he pushed in the chair, then ran his fingertips over her shoulders.

“Comfortable?”

“Yes.” He sat down and picked up her plate, placing healthy amounts of food on it before placing it back in front of her. She watched him fill his own plate, and then he said a small blessing before picking up his fork.

He ate with gusto while she took small bites, her mind wandering to places it probably should not go.

“Is it not to your liking?” he asked.

“It is delicious, I am just thinking of other things.”

“Such as?”

“Our wedding night.” There, she had said it. She picked up a piece of meat, tore at it with her fingers, then set it back down and picked up a fork.

He laughed softly, then set down his fork and picked up the meat with his fingers, putting a bite into his mouth. “When we are alone we will forgo manners, how is that?”

She laughed. “You know, Sterling, I thought you a bit priggish. I think I was wrong.”

“I have been groomed all my life to be a Duke. My parents taught me propriety was paramount, in public.” He took a drink from his ale. “As long as you have brought up the subject of our wedding night, I have another question to ask. In the carriage I asked if anyone had touched you, and when you answered you looked to the floor. Were you lying to me?”

“No.” She picked up her own glass, took a healthy swig. She swallowed, then took another one, hoping the alcohol would fortify her. “I have been touched, but it has been by my own hand, no one else’s.”

She gazed at him, expecting to see a look of distaste on his face. Instead she saw a look of amazement—and dare she think it? Lust.

“Oh my, that is a tantalizing idea.” His voice was much huskier than it had been before, and she knew she had been right. He wanted her. She took another large swallow from her drink, set her glass on the table and pushed away. He did the same and started to stand, but she pushed him back down, sitting on his lap and wrapping her arms around his chest.

She claimed his lips, pressing down into him as his body stiffened in shock. Within seconds, though, his arms closed around her, holding her close. One hand went to her head, pulling her down to deepen the kiss.

Desire swept through her as his tongue butted against her lips. She opened for him at once, groaning as he entered her mouth. This was much better than she had anticipated. The feelings swirling inside her centered in her belly, spreading out to her nipples and quim. His hands roamed her body now, touching her back and sides intimately.

When he cupped a breast, she threw her head back and cried out, arching into his touch. “Sterling, that feels wonderful.” He pressed his mouth against her nipple, which ached to be free from her clothing. He lifted her from his lap, knocking the chair over as he stood and strode to the door.

“Where are you going?” She feared that she had disgusted him, and he was running from her as fast as he could. She had obviously done something very wrong.

“To send for a priest. I will not take you outside our marriage bed, but I cannot wait for tomorrow, either. We wed tonight.”

* * * *

“I have a very beautiful nightgown being made for our wedding night. It is much prettier than...” Vesta trailed her fingers over the cotton shift. “I am sorry.”

“Vesta, you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.”

Her mouth went dry with his words. She was a Duchess now, a wife. And she was about to make love for the first time. The idea astonished her. It was certainly not how she had expected this day to end.

It took the priest almost an hour to arrive, and that was after the innkeeper had dispatched a stable hand to fetch him. The priest had been reluctant to perform the ceremony until Sterling provided papers from his bag that showed he had already filed for a certificate in London, and the banns had been announced.

Then he had been happy to officiate, especially when Sterling promised a sizable donation to his small parish. When he had pronounced them husband and wife, Vesta’s hands shook, and Sterling had gasped them in his own, holding them tight.

His kiss had been chaste and sweet, everything she had expected a wedding kiss to be. The entire population of the inn had served as witnesses, and Vesta knew the people there would have a story to tell their friends forever. They had seen the Duke of Waterford wed his Duchess without benefit of the huge wedding that had already been planned.

The tale would spread like wildfire, and Vesta was sure everyone in London would know by morning. But she did not care. She was wed, and the man she was married to had turned from a cold, uncaring hulk into a sweet, intelligent man she wanted to stay with forever.

“What shall I do now? Do I...?” He put a finger against her lips and she kissed it.

“There is no plan for lovemaking, Vesta. You do what comes naturally and allow things to happen. For tonight, you will lie back and let me love you, let me soothe away the pain that will come from taking your maidenhead. When we return home, I will teach you many, many ways to bring pleasure to us both.”

He scooped her up his arms then carried her to the bed. It was a little disconcerting to her that everyone downstairs knew what was happening, but she pushed the idea out of her mind as quickly as it appeared.

All that mattered to her right now was Sterling.

He gently placed her on the mattress then stepped away to strip off his jacket and shirt.

“Oh my.” Her breathing grew erratic as she studied his broad chest and shoulders. “You are so...I...oh my.”

His deep chuckle made her blush, and when his hands went to his breeches she turned her gaze toward the fireplace. “Watch me, Vesta. I want you to see me, so you will not be afraid of me.”

“I am not afraid.” She looked to where his fingers worked his buttons. “Well, maybe a little.”

She kept her gaze focused on his fingers, and when he stripped away the material and revealed his manhood, she gasped.

“That’s a prick?”

His deep laughter sent pleasurable chills up her spine. “Indeed, my wife. This is a prick, specifically my prick. I hope you and he will be great friends.”

“So do I.” She licked her lips then stood, grasping her shift and pulling it over her head. When she heard him groan, she knew he liked what he saw as much as she had liked seeing him. She sat back on the bed, scooting to the headboard.

“Should I lie down?” She wanted to touch him, feel him, to run her hands over every inch of his body.

He knelt on the bed and crawled toward her until their faces were inches apart. He cupped her face in his hands, caressing her temples as his lips claimed hers. This time she was the one who pressed her tongue out, seeking entry into his mouth, which he gave easily.

He tasted of the ale they had with dinner and she drank him in, savoring the taste of him. He nibbled on her lower lip, then trailed kisses down her neck to her breast, sucking a nipple into his mouth and making her gasp.

“Oh, I like that.” She groaned as he gently bit her, the feeling sweet. Then he pulled back and cupped her breast in his hand, lapping at her nipple as if it were a bowl of cream. She wiggled as he played, caressing his back and shoulders. When he moved to her other breast she shifted her weight to give him better access.

This was so much nicer than anything she had read about. His touch warmed her body, the tingles and sensations soaring through her and centering in her clit.

“Tell me, Vesta, when you touched yourself did you climax?”

“I do not know. It felt good, but...” She shook her head, then gasped when his hand trailed down to her quim.

“Open for me.” She nodded and obeyed immediately, allowing his fingers to gently part her curls. He found her clit much quicker than she had the few times she had tried, and she leaned against the headboard as he stroked her.

The tremors building inside her would not allow her to go anywhere. All she could do was wiggle her hips, savoring the feel of his strong fingers on her soft, sensitive folds.

“Incredible,” she whispered as he caressed her. “Sterling, I think...” She put both hands on the bed, lifting her body into his touch. “What is happening?”

The tremors were building, her body feeling tight as a newly donned corset. This had not happened before. Was something wrong now? Had something been wrong when she had done it?

“Shush. Relax, little one.” He pressed his thumb against her hard nub and she cried out.

“Sterling!”

He pressed harder and the feelings inside her exploded. She let go of the sheets, her body moving wildly under him as she tossed her head back and forth.

“Enjoy it, sweet one. It feels good, yes?”

When the feelings subsided, he moved his hand but she grasped it, trying to hold it in place. “Again, please.” She joined in his laughter.

“You are an unexpected treasure,” he said. “You can be my Duchess in the main house, and my little whore in the bedroom. Would you like that?”

“If being your whore means repeating what just happened, then yes, a thousand times yes.”

He kissed her gently, then her gaze traveled down his body to where his manhood jutted out between them. “It seems larger than I had thought it would be. Will it hurt?”

“The first time, yes. But I will be as gentle as possible. And the wetness we just formed will ease my entry. Touch me, Vesta. Wrap your fingers around my cock. Feel how hard I am for you.”

She grasped him tightly, and when he moaned, she released him. “Did I hurt you?”

“No.” He took her hand and put it back on his hard cock. “Just like that. Good girl. Your touch is amazing.”

She stroked him, varying the firmness of her grip, sliding her hand up and down. She savored his low groans as she explored him, her fingers cupping the head and tickling the slit at the end. She used her free hand to cup his sac, which hung down invitingly.

He stayed in place, kneeling before her, but she could hear his rapid breath change at times, wondered if her touch gave him the same exquisite feelings his had given to her. After a few long, glorious minutes, he stilled her fingers.

“Vesta, I need to be inside you.” He leaned down and placed his lips on hers, kissing her gently. “Are you ready?”

“I think so, yes. I am still a little nervous.”

“Sweet one, it will be fine.” He moved back, and she lay down under him, her hands stroking her own stomach.

“What should I do?”

“You should relax, my wife. Your tension will cause more pain if you do not release it.” He lay down next to her, trailing his hand down to her quim, stroking her clit and building the wonderful feelings that had been there before.

“That feels so good,” she whispered, moving her hips to match his touch.

When he knelt between her legs, she spread them as wide as possible, her gaze glued on his face. He leaned over and kissed her, and she felt the tip of his cock brush against her curls, making her gasp.

“So beautiful,” he whispered, trailing kisses over her cheeks. “My gorgeous Duchess.”

His prick moved inside her folds, rubbing up and down, the tip grazing against her clit and sending tendrils of pleasure through her body. He continued to move, caressing her with his hardness until he moved his hips just a bit, and slid into her channel.

“That did not hurt,” she whispered. “It feels quite pleasurable, quite full.”

He gave her a sweet smile, then put his hands on either side of her face, moving in just a little more. The fullness increased and she groaned softly. He moved a little more, then stilled his hips.

“I like it,” she said, “but why did you stop?”

He kissed her, his tongue licking at her lower lip, and then pain shot through her as he thrust harder. He captured her cry with his mouth, sliding into her more, stopping at different points as she clutched his shoulders with her hands.

When he broke the kiss she murmured, “hurts,” knowing it made her sound like a child but not caring.

“It is all right, little one. Your body will grow accustomed to having me inside you.”

He used a finger to gently wipe away a tear that escaped from the corner of one eye, then licked it from his finger.

“Will it always hurt?” She knew the answer because Margaret had told her. But now, actually feeling him inside her, she could not help but ask the question.

“No, little one, just the first time.”

She smiled shyly. “It feels better now.”

“I am very happy to hear that.” He moved his hips a little and she felt him slide deeper inside her body. When he started to rock his hips, the pain turned into a dull throb that caused little more than twinges of pain.

“Vesta, please tell me if I hurt you more.” He was moving faster now, his hips rocking into her body, his prick sliding in and out. She nodded as she watched him gasp for breath, his face tight with concentration.

He muttered her name several more times, then his body seemed to seize and he groaned so loudly she thought they would hear him in London. She felt warmth inside her as his hips moved faster, and then he lay down on top of her, holding her close to him, his chest heaving.

Before she could move a muscle he lifted back up. “Did I hurt you too much? Are you in pain?”

Vesta shook her head, amazement running through her. This was not the horrible event Elizabeth had told her about; it was the sweet, breath-taking experience that she wanted to do again and again.

“When can we do it again?”

“Minx!” He collapsed next to her and she mourned the loss of him. “I must remember to thank your brother for accepting my offer for your hand. You are most perfect in every way, Vesta.”

“As are you.” She put her cheek on his shoulder. “A week ago, I would not have echoed your thanks, but today, I will do it, gladly. I do not think I could have found a more perfect husband.”

Chapter Thirteen

“My driver informs me that the roads are too wet to travel. I am afraid we’ll have to stay here yet another night.” Sterling closed the door to their room and set down the pitcher of water he had retrieved from the hallway. Last night he had made his intentions to the innkeeper very clear. They were not to be disturbed in any way.

But when he had gone down this morning to check on their departure, and was told it was next to impossible because of the after effects of the storm, he had found fresh water, along with a tray of bread, cheese and ale sitting near their door. And it was a good thing, too. He was famished. Surprise had rushed through him when the innkeeper told him it was neigh on to two in the afternoon. He never slept late, no matter what time he arrived home from the night’s adventures. Getting up early was just something he did. Until now. It was because he had not wanted to leave the warm bed, and the sweet, eager embrace of his new wife.

“Well, that is a shame.” She sat up and let the sheets fall, displaying her perfect breasts to his view. His cock hardened instantly. “However shall we pass the time?”

“You are insatiable, Vesta. If I had not taken your maidenhead myself, I would think you more experienced than you are.”

She pouted and he hardened more. “Does it displease you that I am curious, that I enjoyed our encounters so far?”

“On the contrary, it thrills me.” He opened the door and retrieved the tray of food, walking across the room and placing it on the bed.

“Hungry?”

“Only for you.” She made a grab for the pitcher as it tipped, her breasts jiggling as she moved. Her giggle sent wonderful chills up his spine. He’d already taken her twice, once for her maidenhead last night and once again this morning, a slow, wondrous joining that had left them both sated and sleepy. He remembered her soft moans, the way she moved her hips, trying to

take more of him inside her. The way she wrapped her legs around him and said, “Harder, please.”

“I want to touch you.” Her soft voice brought him back to the here and now.

“But you already have touched me, Vesta, in so many ways.” And indeed she had. Not for one moment had he thought the prim, proper Lady Vesta Richmond would be so daring to read a scandalous novel, and then want to act the part of the sultry woman described on the pages. It made her perfect, in every way.

He had thought to have a wife who would be the perfect hostess, the perfect face for society to see and admire. A wife whose company he could enjoy as friends. He had that, and so much more. The fact that she obviously enjoyed their lovemaking was something he had only dreamed about. To have it become a reality made him feel like the richest man in England.

“You know what I mean. I want to touch your prick; stroke it, explore it and your ballocks.”

“Is that what the heroine does in *The Duke’s Mistress*?”

“I don’t know. She touches him, yes, but Margaret she...” she paused, as if reconsidering continuing the conversation. Perhaps she thought she was betraying her friend? Sterling wasn’t sure why, since he already knew Vesta had read the scandalous novel, courtesy of her companion. “I have only read the four segments of the novel. That is all that was available to me. Please don’t ask me why. It is private and not mine to divulge.”

“I understand.” He took a deep breath and studied her as she sat, unconcerned about her nakedness. “You would like to read the rest of it, though. Wouldn’t you?”

“Yes.” She nodded eagerly. “I found it quite...entertaining.”

“Well, my little vixen, you will be happy to know I have a copy of it, in its entirety, at my residence in London.”

Her sharp inhalation made him chuckle. “May we read it together?”

“Indeed, but for now...” He took up the tray, transferring it to a nearby table. Who needed food when he had the most beautiful, most magnificent woman in his bed? His fingers went to the buttons of his breeches, then he stopped. “Would you like to undress me, wife?”

Vesta jumped from the bed so quickly he thought she would fall to the floor. She righted herself immediately and crossed to him, pushing his hands away then grabbing the material in eagerness. As she worked to undo him, Sterling thanked the heavens above for the storm, and his

decision to take the back roads. Spending the day in bed with his new wife was an activity that could not be topped.

Vesta felt the hard ridge of his manhood under her fingers. The words she had read previously in *The Duke's Mistress* had not prepared her totally for the incredible feel of her very own duke. True, the initial penetration last night had been painful, but it had dulled, and left a pleasure in its wake. This morning's coupling had provided enjoyment beyond her wildest dreams. Would it continue that way? Would each time they coupled provide more and more bliss?

She certainly hoped so. She could not imagine Elizabeth's revulsion at the act of lovemaking unless it was as Margaret had said, because of the man involved. Vesta tried to imagine herself in the arms of Elizabeth's husband and could not. The only arms she wanted around her belonged to Sterling.

She giggled and then put her hands over her mouth.

"What? Does my prick make you laugh? That is hard on my ego."

"No, Sterling, it is not your dick I am laughing at, it is myself."

The look he gave her heated her skin, making her feel flush. "Explain."

"I must tell you that I was nervous to marry you, since you had not touched me at all. To think of what I would have missed if I had not, though. I was telling myself to thank Calvin for his selection of a husband, and I remembered my reticence. Forgive me for laughing."

"Remind me to thank him as well." He put his fingers under her chin, then claimed her lips. The warmth Vesta felt turned into a fire as her fingers closed around his cock and he groaned into her mouth, deepening the kiss.

"I want to kiss you," she whispered against his lips.

"You are," he returned, stroking her cheeks.

She shook her head, licking her lips as she pulled away slightly. "Down there. I want to kiss your cock."

She felt him go rigid, heard his sharp intake of breath. "You are going to be the death of me."

"Is that wrong? I mean for me to say it, to feel it?" She closed her eyes and leaned into his touch as he stroked her cheeks.

“Darling, nothing between us could ever be wrong. Do not feel as if you cannot talk to me about anything, or propose something that we could do together. I want complete and total honesty between us, in all ways.”

“Then why did you seem so shocked?”

His deep chuckle made her smile. “It is not something most women like to do, sweet one.”

“That I may do it?”

“Yes, you may.” He leaned over, put his lips right next to her ear. “And I will taste you, too, place my tongue inside your quim.”

Vesta shivered in his arms. The idea of his mouth on her most intimate place made her insides quake with need. What would it feel like? And would she be able to lie still and allow him to kiss her there?

Of course you can, ninny. You want to do it to him, do you not? She watched as he pulled away slowly, peeling off the rest of his clothing.

“You first,” he said when he was naked, his hands caressing her shoulders. “Let us go to the bed, shall we?”

“What do I do?” The words were barely a whisper.

“We do anything we want,” he replied. “And right now what I want is for you to lie back and enjoy what I can do for you.”

Vesta licked her lips then batted her eyelashes rapidly. “As you wish, Your Grace.” She turned to the bed, swaying her hips as she moved. She climbed onto the bed on her hands and knees, looking over her shoulder to where Sterling still stood. His cock jutted up from between his thighs, the sight making her quim pulse, almost as if it could beg him to take her.

She lay down, caressed her thighs. “Do you mean like this?”

“What would the Duke’s mistress do?” He crossed to the bed. When he was right next to her, she spread her legs, running her fingers over her mons.

“She would do this, giving her lover the access he desired.”

The bed dipped as he sat, moving her legs so that he could lie down and put his face near her core. His hot breath against her wet, sensitive skin made her gasp. “Sterling.”

“Hush.” He gently caressed her, then bent and traced his tongue over her slit. Vesta’s hips shot off the bed, undulating as he kissed her nether lips, his touch gentle.

“Sterling, oh I...oh...”

“Yes?” He did not lift his head to speak and the words seemed to blow against her, making her clit quiver with anticipation.

“That feels...more.”

“As you wish, my darling.” His tongue grew bolder, delving inside her. He nipped at her inner lips, the increase in pressure making her desire build to impossible heights. When she thought she would die from the pleasure he brought her, he took it even higher, swirling his tongue around her tight bud, flicking it over the hardened flesh until the pleasure peaked, making her body rock in response.

She heard a scream, thought maybe it was her own, then felt the pleasure build again as his tongue continued its sweet assault. His deep murmurs of approval made the experience that much sweeter. When the pleasure soared through her again, she wrapped her fingers in his hair as if to keep him in place.

His lips moved to her thigh, leaving a trail of wet kisses. He blew on the spots he had kissed, then licked her skin. “You taste magnificent, Vesta.” He moved up her body, stopping at times to kiss her, or gently nip at her skin. He suckled a breast, his fingers teasing her other nipple.

“That feels so wonderful. May we just stay here, in this room, forever?”

“Unfortunately, no.” He kissed her chin then lay down next to her, trailing his fingers over her stomach. “I take it you are happy right now?”

“I am not sure happy is the right word. I would go for something stronger, like ecstatic, or elated, or euphoric.”

“Once you get through with the e words, maybe we could try for fantastic, or fabulous, or...”

“Grand, glorious, or just plain, happy.” She giggled, snuggling into his chest. He gathered her close and she sighed, feeling so at home in his arms. “You have distracted me, Your Grace, from what I had planned earlier.”

“It is never too late.” He took her hand, guided it to his cock. “And you don’t have to use your tongue, little one. I could take you now instead, bring us both great pleasure.”

Vesta gasped, pushing away from him. “And deny me the chance to examine you? I think not.” He had been inside her, but now she wanted the chance to touch him, feel his skin under

her fingertips, see what sort of emotions she could wrangle out of him, like he had just done to her. She pointed to the middle of the bed and he moved, but instead of lying down, he sat with his back against the headboard.

Vesta knelt between his legs, her gaze fastened on his cock. She tentatively moved a finger, traced it down his length. His hiss and the deep groan that followed let her know it felt good to him. That knowledge empowered her and she used two fingers this time, one going up one side while the other went down. When she reached the base, and the tip, she switched their direction, savoring the sharp intake of his breath.

“Vesta.” He practically growled the word and she moaned softly.

“Yes, Your Grace?”

“You will drive me insane with those fingers.”

She stopped and looked up at him, even though she was loath to take her gaze off his cock. “First I will be the death of you, and now I am going to drive you insane? I suppose that means I am not a good wife.”

Vesta moved her fingers again, sliding them around the base of his prick. When he started to move his hips, she leaned over, her heart beating rapidly. She touched her lips to the tip of him, gently licked the slit.

“Oh dear God in heaven.” He bucked his hips toward her and she opened her mouth, closing it around the edge of his cock. He groaned again, this time louder, and she pulled away, licking her lips.

“Darling, do not do anything if it bothers you.” The desire in his voice spurred her on and she licked at him again.

“I want to, but I am afraid I do not know how. Will you teach me?”

He closed his eyes and she wondered if he were trying to think of a way to say no and not hurt her feelings.

“Vesta,” he said finally. “I will teach you, but I am afraid right now I would not have the self-control to do so. Right now I feel as if I will climax the second you take me inside your mouth, and I do not want that to happen. Not the first time. Do you understand what I am saying?”

“I understand,” she said, darting her tongue around the head of his cock. “When you spill your seed, you do not want it to be inside my mouth. Although I would like to experience that some time. Please.”

“Darling, I promise to teach you, but not now. Not this first time.” He swallowed hard and she could almost feel the tight rein he had on his body right now. “If you continue to lick me like that, I am afraid I will not be able to control myself.”

She closed her mouth around him, felt him pulse under her tongue. “Vesta!” His hands were in her hair now, tugging, the hard sensation slightly painful, yet mixed with a little pleasure, too. He released her hair almost immediately, as if he realized what he’d done, then stroked her.

“Darling, you must stop. Now.” She pulled back and ran her finger over her swollen lips.

“But I like it.”

“I promise you, later.” His breathing was almost ragged now and she worried that she’d caused him pain. “Come atop me.”

She put her hands on her chest, her face gleaming with wonder. “Me? We can do it that way?”

“Yes.” He motioned her toward him and she straddled him quickly, moving up his body. He put his hands on her hips, kissing her breasts as he positioned her quim above his prick.

“Now, slide down slowly.”

Vesta savored the feel of him filling her, of the slow, almost tortuous way he guided her down. When she would try to hurry the pace, he grasped her hips tighter, slowing her descent. When he was fully inside her she kissed him. His hands wove into her hair, holding their lips together, his tongue teasing her own.

“Sterling, I...need...”

“Yes.” He guided her again, moving her up and down, the tension building inside her as they rocked back and forth. He moved one hand from her hip to her clit, teasing it with swift, hard strokes until Vesta exploded, the pressure from his fingers and the hard cock sliding in and out of her too much to take. She felt herself tighten, heard the strangled, “Oh bugger,” that escaped his throat. He flipped them easily, her head hanging off the bed now as he pounded into her, making her feel as if he was now a part of her body, as if they would be joined forever.

He collapsed on top of her after his release, and she welcomed his weight, wrapping her arms and legs around him.

“Like I said, my love,” he whispered, lifting up on his hands. “You are going to be the death of me.”

“Then we will die together.”

“And die happy,” he said with a laugh. He tried to pull away and she held him close.

“Stay with me. It feels so wonderful.” His kiss was gentle, and he moved her legs from around him, positioning them on their sides. She felt him slip out, groaned at the loss.

“Do not worry, little Vesta. I will be back inside you as soon as humanly possible. That is a promise.”

* * * *

“Thank you, Sterling, for coming to Gretna Green, although we are already married.”

“Vesta, I would go a thousand miles out of the way to please you.”

Vesta scrambled across the carriage and sat on his lap, letting a hand trail down his chest until she cupped his cock. “Remember what you promised me last night. You will teach me how to pleasure you with my mouth.”

“Oh yes, I will my Lady wife. As soon as I learn to control myself around you.” She kissed him, sucking his tongue into her mouth as the carriage rolled to a stop. Her body still tingled from their morning lovemaking. She was thrilled that what she heard was true. There was no pain after the first time, only sweet tendrils of pleasure that made her crave more of him. Being held in his arms was the most perfect thing she had ever experienced, and she never wanted it to end.

His hand cupped her breast then quickly moved to her skirt, pushing aside the material to caress her thigh. When the carriage door jerked open and Calvin’s infuriated cry of, “Vesta!” reached her ears, she gasped.

“Get out here immediately!” She looked to see her brother, his eyes dark with rage, staring into the carriage. Behind him she saw Margaret, putting a hand in front of her mouth to stifle a laugh. Ethan stood beside Margaret, gazing at them sheepishly.

“How did you get here so quickly?”

“Quickly? It’s been two days. We rode through a storm,” Calvin said, his voice low. “Now get out here.”

“Do not speak to my wife in that manner, Melbrook.” Sterling’s low voice seemed to match her brother’s.

“Your wife? What?” Calvin moved away from the door, turning back to help her down. The anger burning in his eyes made her cringe until Sterling stepped behind her, wrapping a protective arm around her waist.

“Vesta and I were wed two nights past. She is no longer your concern, but mine.”

Calvin’s anger seemed to rise. “By God if you hurt her, if you forced her to do anything against her will, I will make you pay dearly. I do not care if you are a Duke, I will...”

“Calvin, he did not force me.” She put her hand on her brother’s arm. “It is all right.”

He shook his head. “No, it is not, Vesta. Do you realize the talk, the scandal this will cause? People will think you gave yourself to him before you were wed.”

“It was because of my virginity that we were wed. I wanted to make love, and Sterling would not take my maidenhead without benefit of marriage.”

“Oh hells afire!” Calvin moved backward, his gaze fixed on her. “You did not say that to him! You did not give yourself to him already!”

“I did, several times, and I loved it.” Margaret’s laughter made Vesta smile but Calvin still shook his head.

“Vesta, all our plans—our father, what will he say?”

“I do not care,” Sterling replied, “and neither should you. Vesta and I are legally wed, but we are planning to repeat the ceremony at the time we had already scheduled. That will satisfy society, and give them something new to talk about.”

She took a step toward her brother. “Calvin, you have been more of a father to me than our father, and I will always be grateful, but what is done is done. I am a Duchess now, and more importantly, I found a man I can grow to love deeply. I have you to thank for that.”

Calvin’s anger seemed to disappear and he sighed. “Well, if you are wed then we made this trip for nothing.”

“It is not *nothing* to know my brother cares so much for me as to threaten my new husband, a Duke.”

Calvin’s nod was curt, and she could tell he thought he had failed her, that somehow things had gone awry and it was his fault. But then he laughed, short bursts of laughter that made his shoulders shake.

“Vesta, you always were a handful. Your Grace, I hope you can handle her.”

“I do not think that will be a problem.” Sterling tipped her face to his and kissed her gently. Then he turned to Calvin. “And it is Sterling, please.”

Vesta turned to Margaret, hugging her close. “I hear you have a new lover.” Her friend stiffened as Vesta whispered the words, then giggled.

“Is it that obvious?”

“Yes, Sterling said he could see it when you looked at each other.”

Margaret and Ethan exchanged glances and Vesta could tell what Sterling said was true.

“Maybe the trip does not have to be wasted.” Vesta stepped away from Margaret. “You and Ethan should wed.”

“What?” Margaret shook her head. “It would hardly be—”

“A splendid idea,” Ethan replied. “We do not meet the new laws but that does not mean we cannot seal an agreement here. Margaret, will you marry me?”

“I am not of your station, Ethan.” Margaret had turned to Ethan and said the words low, but Vesta still heard them.

His reply made her smile. “You are the woman I love, and I could care less if you are a princess or a scullery maid. I want you for my wife.”

The small group grew quiet, and it was Sterling who stepped forward. “Mrs. Compton, I believe he is waiting for your answer, and may I say, it does seem a shame to waste a trip.”

Margaret gazed at all of them, and then finally fastened her gaze on Ethan. There were tears in her eyes as she nodded, and Vesta clapped her hands together in delight.

“But the new regulations, about residency. We have no license and...”

“Please, Mrs. Compton,” Sterling interjected. “I will take care of everything. Money greases a lot of paths.” He leaned down to kiss Vesta, then moved toward the blacksmith’s office where weddings took place.

“Your Grace, a word.” Ethan stepped in front of him. “You do not have to do this. I can take care of the money for my own wedding.”

“Consider it a wedding gift, from my wife and I. Seeing Mrs. Compton married will make Vesta very happy, and that is paramount to me now.”

Ethan nodded. “Then we thank you for the gift. When we get back to Bath, I will give you a copy of *The Duke’s Mistress*, the little tale that seemed to set all this in motion, in return.”

Sterling laughed and pulled Vesta into his arms. He kissed her gently, and then turned to Ethan. “We thank you for the offer, but—”

“We already have a copy,” Vesta continued. “Sterling and I discussed it last night. And I cannot wait to get home so we can read it, together.”

Vesta shifted her gaze to her brother, who looked as if he would drop dead from a heart seizure at any moment.

“Do not look so shocked, Calvin. I am a woman, after all, and a wife now. Which makes you free to pursue Lady Morset.”

“What?” He shook his head and she laughed.

“Do not deny it. I saw you with her that day. I know she is your mistress. Do the honorable thing and marry her.”

When he spoke again his voice was deep. “It is not that simple, Vesta.”

“It is,” she replied. “You know you want her, and love her. I can tell by the look on your face. Follow your heart, and make her Lady Melbrook, the future Marchioness of Brightly, when you inherit the title from father. It will do my heart so good to see you as happy as I am at this very moment.”

Calvin ran a hand through his hair, and Vesta saw the worry in his face. “I am afraid Lady Morset is opposed to marriage.”

“Then seduce her into the idea, Calvin. Believe me, she cares for you. I can see it. And if you do not even try, you will be miserable. You know it as well as I do.”

Commotion from the blacksmith stables caught their attention. “Come along,” she said, taking his arm. “Let us go watch Ethan and Margaret wed. Perhaps that will show you how happy you can be, just like they are, and just like Sterling and I are. And if you need any help with Lady Morset, let me know. I can be very sneaky, if the occasion requires it.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.”

9 September, 1880

My dearest cousin,

Thank you so much for your letter. My spirits are much improved from when I wrote you last, I must tell you that your letter helped me a great deal. His Grace had already sensed my distress, though, and came to my house the day after the affair at the Duke of _____'s house to speak with me.

A mistress, he said, serves her lover's needs. He needs to share me with others. It excited him greatly, he said, to watch Hector (I shall just refer to him this way from now on, for fear I might write his name if I don't. I imagine him to be the Trojan Prince this way) play with my clit.

"I will enjoy watching you pleasure him," he said, stroking my hair. "Would you like to suck his cock?"

I shook my head violently, saying in no uncertain terms that I was not a whore.

"Wanting such things does not make you a whore," he whispered in my ear. "Many women want such pleasure. They are either unwilling, or unable, to express themselves. Why do you think I selected you as a lover?"

I glanced at him, wary of answering. "You tell me why," I finally said.

"Because I could see in you a spirit that could match my own. I followed you from the house to see if you would let me fuck you, and you did. You want to explore and do things, but you were trapped by society. I have given you an opportunity. And do not worry about Hector. He understands that he touches you only with my permission, and only when I am there."

His words cut to my core, and they made sense, truly they did. Added to your reassurance that there was nothing wrong with me, I felt much better. I did desire to try new things, and there was nothing wrong with that desire. I would not fight it, or blame him, although I did tell him I would like to be warned before such...adventures. He shook his head and laughed.

"It is much more fun, sweet Melody, to see your surprise."

Three days after your letter arrived, His Grace came for an afternoon visit with Hector in attendance. It was a surprise to me, as you can guess. I was ready to attend His Grace, which

meant I wore nothing more than a sheer robe as I waited in my bedroom. When the two of them came through the door my quim immediately tightened and my juices flowed.

Without saying a word His Grace pushed my robe to the floor and I stood naked before them. Hector stepped forward and I looked to His Grace, who nodded in approval. I clasped Hector's head firmly as his lips found my nipples, suckling me hard, making them both ache with need as he transferred his attention between the two of them.

His Grace moved to the chair near the fireplace, sitting down to watch. Hector's eager hands roamed my body, pinching my nipples and diving into the thatch between my legs. After a few moments he pushed me to my knees and I undid his breeches, his prick springing to life to before my eyes.

I sucked him eagerly, fascinated to see that it did not feel the same way as taking His Grace in my mouth. Hector is somewhat smaller, as I said. There was a much saltier taste to his skin than to His Grace's. It was not unpleasant, merely different.

He wove his hands in my hair as I sucked, his soft groans exciting me even more. I caught a movement from the corner of my eye and saw His Grace removing his clothing. As if on signal Hector lay on the floor

"On all fours," His Grace ordered me and I knew what was coming. I would be speared at both ends. The idea excited me beyond imagining. I knelt with my head in Hector's lap, taking his hard cock back in my mouth. When His Grace knelt behind me, I groaned in pleasure, and when he entered me I removed my mouth from Hector's cock long enough to cry out for more.

My two lovers used me hard that afternoon, and I loved every moment of it. I sucked and licked Hector as His Grace fucked me, and then, after His Grace has used his fingers on my clit and made me spend, they traded places. His Grace watched intently while Hector entered me, not giving me his cock to suck until his friend had grasped my hips and began pounding into my quim with vigor.

His Grace's cock tasted sweeter, coated with my juices as it was. I reveled in it, sucking him hard, licking him from base to balls and back again. He whispered what a good girl I was, and how much he enjoyed watching me take another man inside my mouth and cunt. When Hector spent it was on my backside, as His Grace had done the first time he had taken me.

I swallowed much of the gift His Grace gave me that afternoon. I had done it before, and at first it was distasteful. Now, however, I feel closer to him when he does it, and I find myself craving it much as I continue to crave his touch.

Hector left soon afterward, thanking me for a most agreeable afternoon. The words made me giggle and I turned to His Grace who grinned, swung me around and swatted my behind. I jumped and giggled again and he gave me another swat. Within seconds he had me over the bed, spanking me. I asked the reason for it and he would not respond. When it was over, and my buttocks ached he spread my cheeks and ran his finger over my anus.

I feared he would try something in that area but he did not, instead giving me one more hard swat, still refusing to say why I had been spanked. When he dressed, he pulled me close to him, kissing me gently. He said the spanking took place for no reason other than the fact he enjoyed watching my bottom redden.

Truthfully, dear cousin, I found I enjoyed the sensations as well. I worry, though, about what he did at the end, where he touched me but did not enter. Will that be the next thing he does? And if he does, will I allow it like I have allowed everything else? Do I have any control over my body at all anymore? Truthfully I do not know, and not knowing does not bother me as much as it should. I trust His Grace and desire his touch. If he wanted to take me that way I think I might allow it, despite the taboo nature of the act.

Now that I have imparted that deep secret to you, dear cousin, I ask you what do you think? Would that be a nail in my coffin? Or is anything allowed in a relationship between a man and woman?

I eagerly await your reply.

With much love from your cousin,

The Duke's Mistress

Part IV
The Marry Chase

Chapter Fourteen

Calvin wasn't surprised to see so many people flooding Sterling's home. Vesta's "flight" from him, his "capture" of her, and their subsequent marriage at Gretna Green had been the talk of London for a month after they arrived home. They had not bothered to try and dissuade people of the idea they married at Gretna Green. And Calvin soon found out that no matter what they told everyone, people generally believed what they wanted. So they had left well enough alone, and let the new Duke and Duchess of Waterford attract attention. Neither of them seemed to mind.

At first, Calvin had been appalled at the way people gossiped about his sister. But then he decided not to worry about it. If Sterling did not care, then neither should he. Truthfully, it was harder to get used to referring to his new brother-in-law by his first name.

But now the long-planned-for ceremony had taken place, more of a reaffirmation of their wedding vows than anything else, and their house was filled with members of society, straining to get a look at the famous couple who had taunted society's restraints and done things their own way. There were even those who thought they had not married all those months ago and had been living under one roof, having carnal relations with each other, without the benefit of marriage.

Those people could go to the devil, Calvin thought as he stared at his sister. She absolutely beamed as she stood next to Sterling, laughing and greeting their guests, batting her eyes at the men and complimenting the women on their frocks. She charmed them all, and Calvin loved it.

He did not love the fact that their rotten father had not bothered to show up for his own daughter's wedding, claiming she had "embarrassed" him to the fullest with her scandalous behavior. He could not show his face in London, he claimed. His father's letter still infuriated Calvin. The family reputation was ruined, he had written, and if this was how Calvin handled

things, the present Marquess could only hope he had a son by his second wife, one that would make him proud, even though he would never be the heir.

At first Calvin had been infuriated by his father's words. But as time had worn on, he realized exactly how little his sire cared for his children. Calvin said a silent prayer the present Marchioness did not conceive, for fear her children would receive the same treatment he and Vesta had.

"You are deep in thought, Lord Melbrook." The throaty voice behind him made his cock stir. "Are you contemplating your sister's happiness, for she looks as if she could light the world with her smile."

He turned toward Beatrice who held a small glass of punch in her hand.

"Indeed she does, Lady Morset. I made the right choice when I accepted the Duke's offer for her hand. Although I admit, as you know, that it was more his position and money that prompted my decision."

Beatrice glanced around them and he could see she was checking to see if anyone had overheard him. His words let on that the widowed Lady Morset had intimate knowledge of the Richmond family. He did not care who knew. He was tired of waiting. Vesta was right: she was happy in her marriage and it was time for him to seek one of his own.

"I would like to call upon you tomorrow, if that is agreeable to you. Perhaps we could take a turn around the park?" That would do it. One didn't take a turn around the park with just anyone. That outing would let society know his intentions toward Beatrice.

She took a sip from her cup and sighed. "It is warm in here. Would you care to escort me to the gardens, my lord?"

"Of course." He offered his arm and she took it. He noticed her touch was light, so that anyone who saw them would just think he was simply being a gentleman and escorting her from the crush inside the house.

When they were outside, she indicated a bench near a tall tree. "I would like to sit, if you please."

Once she was seated, he stood near her, his hands clasped behind his back. "Better?"

"Calvin, you know we cannot be seen together in public. Not yet. In a month, my mourning period will have been over for six months. Then, a few months after that, I may accept your suit."

“No.” Her eyes widened in surprise and it made him feel a little guilty, but he was tired of watching. Vesta and Sterling were happy, and Ethan and Margaret were even now expecting a child. Why was he being denied happiness? “I do not wish to wait, Beatrice. I want you now.”

She glanced around nervously. “Calvin, I...”

“Listen to me, Beatrice. When we made love two days ago—”

“Hush.” She stood quickly. “Lower your voice, please.”

Calvin took a deep, calming breath. “When we made love last you begged me not to leave your bed, to stay with you. Then, you woke me just before dawn so that I might leave undetected. I am tired of hiding what I feel for you. I love you, Beatrice, and I want you as my wife.”

“I love you too, Calvin. But...”

“But what? Do you worry about what society will say? Look at what is happening inside. Vesta flaunted the rules and she is happier than ever. This party, as you can see, is very well attended, and she has not been shunned. If that is what you are worried about, any problems we face will pass. We will fight them together.”

“Of course I can see your point, Calvin, and I do love you.”

“Do you? Because if you do not please tell me now.” And if she did say such a thing, Calvin knew his heart would break in two.

“No, Calvin, I love you. Will all my heart. Can you not wait just one more month?”

“What difference will one month make? Is there something you are not telling me?”

“No.” The strife in her voice worried him and he took a step back.

“You have asked for one month, but it’s not really a month, is it? It is longer than that. One more month and then several months after that, you said. That is well beyond the acceptable bounds for a mourning period. Your husband has already been dead for more than a year.”

She said nothing, instead focusing on something behind him. He turned toward the house and saw nothing there. “Very well, Beatrice. I will take you at your word, that you do indeed love me. I pray you are telling me the truth. But if something is wrong, I only wish you would confide in me.”

She opened her mouth, and for a moment, he thought she would tell him. But then she shook her head and took a sip from the punch glass she still held.

“Will you ride with me tomorrow?”

“No, but I am going to the theater with Lady Sinclair. Perhaps you could visit me afterward. I will leave the back door open for you.”

“And what happens when I tire of sneaking in the back door like a thief in the night?”

“It will not be much longer, Calvin. I promise.” She rose to her feet and hurried around him, heading into the house.

He watched her go, telling himself he should not push her so hard. He had the sense something was very wrong, something she had not told him. Perhaps he needed to do a little investigating to find out exactly what it was.

* * * *

“Perhaps you should hire a runner. They might be able to tell you what is going on.” Calvin glanced over at Ethan, who spoke to him, but had his gaze trained on his wife, who stood talking to Vesta.

“I might consider it, if I cannot get her to tell me what is wrong.” Calvin took a drink from his glass and tried not to search the room again. Beatrice was gone; he knew that. Vesta told him she had left soon after coming in from the garden, claiming a headache.

“Do not hire a runner,” Sterling put in. “They are part of an official organization, you know. It is possible their involvement could become known, and you do not want that. I have a man you could hire for the position, if necessary. He will be discreet and will report only to me. You will never meet him or have contact, unless you so desire.”

Calvin studied the liquid in his glass then cleared his throat. “If it comes to that, I will remember your offer, Sterling. Thank you.”

“We are family now.”

“Yes, family,” Calvin said, turning to look at Ethan. “Is it true?”

“No, you and I are not related, Calvin.” Calvin chuckled, and Ethan joined in. “Yes, it is true. Margaret is with child.”

“You work fast,” Sterling said, leaning over to clap Ethan on the shoulder. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you. It was quite a surprise. I would have preferred to wait a while, but Margaret is thrilled. My family was having trouble coming to terms with the fact I married someone they consider beneath their station, but this announcement changed everything for them. Now they are ecstatic and already choosing baby names for us to use.”

Calvin glanced at Sterling. "And you? When will we hear the pitter-patter of little feet in the Waterford household?"

"Not for a while," Sterling replied. "I am selfish and want to keep Vesta to myself for some time."

"I wish I could keep Beatrice to myself for a while."

"Perhaps you should slip her a copy of *The Duke's Mistress*." Sterling fought a grin. "Heaven's knows it has provided Vesta and I with many hours of entertainment."

"Please." Calvin held up his hand. "You are my friend, but she is still my sister. I do not want to hear the details."

"I was not offering details," Sterling replied. "Just providing a statement of fact."

"Perhaps she has a bad taste from her last marriage," Ethan said. "Did her husband raise his fists to her?"

"Walter? No, or at least not that she has said."

"I could have my man look into him," Sterling offered.

"Let me think on it," Calvin replied. "In the meantime I think I might be off. Do you think Vesta will mind if I leave early?"

"Have a good time," Sterling said. "And if you need a copy of *The Duke's Mistress* let me know. I can find one for you."

Calvin stood and offered his hand. "You know, that might be an interesting idea. How soon can you have it?"

"I will have it delivered to your home tomorrow."

* * * *

"Stop here." Beatrice knocked on the roof of the carriage and the conveyance drew to a slow stop. She looked out the windows, seeing nothing but the dark of night. She hated doing this. Hated having to come out one night a month to the park. She had two male servants with her, in addition to the coachman in case there was trouble.

But the man who met her did not want trouble. He wanted money, and she would gladly continue to pay him if it meant he would just go away, and stay away, four months from now, as he had promised.

Josh, the hulking stable boy, got out first. Beatrice watched as he glanced around, then turned and offered his hand. “Milady, I wish ye would let me do this. It ain’t fitting for you to be out here.”

“Thank you, Josh, that is most kind. But this is my problem and I will handle it.”

Mark, one of the house boys, stepped out behind Beatrice. “’Ere he comes, on time, liken always.”

Beatrice nodded even as her stomach twisted in knots. Two men walked across the park, their heads bent in conversation. When they reached her group, both men nodded.

“Lady Morset, a pleasure.”

“I wish I could say the same thing, Mr. DuBois.” She took a packet from Josh and gave it to the Frenchman. “Here. Four more months, and then I will see you no more.”

His laughter was light. “Madame, every month you ask the same question, and every month I give you the same answer. You have my word.”

“You will forgive me if I do not put much stock in that.”

DuBois put his hand on his chest. “You wound me.” He opened the packet and flipped through the bills. “All seems to be in order.”

“My marker.” She held out her hand and he dropped a rolled sheet on paper into it. She opened the paper, read the note and signature and handed it to Josh. He took a lamp off the side of the carriage and dropped the paper inside. It flared to life once then quickly disappeared in the flames.

“Until next month.” DuBois bowed and he and his huge companion left the same way they came.

Josh and Mark helped Beatrice back into the carriage then climbed onto the back. They said it was safer that way, to keep an eye out for trouble, but Beatrice knew it was not true. If it were, they would ride that way on the trip to the park. They were giving her time alone with her grief.

The carriage rolled silently through the park, then turned onto the cobbled street, the clip-clops of the horses echoing through the otherwise silent evening.

As she always did after such an encounter, Beatrice put her face in her hands and wept. “Oh Walter, how could you do this to me?” She cursed her late husband again, then lifted her

head and sniffled. Four more months. She just had to hold Calvin off for that amount of time and things would be perfect again. She could accept his suit and they would live happily ever after.

She was sure of it.

Chapter Fifteen

“There is the Earl of Trent. He’s quite handsome, do you not think?”

“Ellen, he is at least five years younger than I am, and a Duke already. Surely he is looking for a wife who is more his age.” Beatrice looked at the playbill and wondered yet again why she had agreed to come to the theater tonight. She should have stayed home, taken a long, soaking bath to prepare for Calvin’s visit later in the evening.

She looked forward to seeing him, to being in his arms and feeling his lips on her body. One minute with him was enough to wipe away the bad memories of the prior evening. That was until next month’s deadline drew near.

Four more months, Beatrice, four more months. She repeated the words over and over in her mind before looking around at the crowd of people gathered for the evening performance.

Things were sure to run late this evening, and she was glad she’d sent a note to Calvin, letting him know not to arrive until after midnight. Tonight she wanted him to take her hard, to pound into her until she could think of nothing but the two of them, joined together.

“Lady Morset.” A hand at her back made her start, she turned to look into Calvin’s knowing eyes.

“Cal...Lord Melbrook.” He took her hand and kissed it gently, then turned to Ellen. “Lady Sinclair. How lovely you both look this evening.”

“Why Lord Melbrook, what a flirt you are.” Ellen batted her eyelashes at him. “If I were not already wed, I would snatch you up in a heartbeat.” She gave Beatrice a coy look, then coughed.

“Oh, dear. Perhaps I am catching a cold. I do believe I need to lie down for a bit in the ladies’ retiring room. Lord Melbrook, would you be so good as to accompany Lady Morset to our box? I would hate for her to be alone while I am gone. My husband had another engagement tonight and it is just the two of us in the box.”

“It would please me greatly.”

“We can see through your act, Ellen. You are not going to lie down, you are leaving.”

“I am indeed, and now that you have a wonderful escort I do not have to worry about you.” Ellen left before Beatrice could reply and Calvin took a step closer to her.

“Did you plan this, the two of you?”

“Me?” He shook his head. “Why would you think such a thing? I came by to ask where you were last night.”

This time it was Beatrice who coughed, loudly. Calvin held up his hand and an attendant arrived with a glass of punch. Beatrice took a long drink then cleared her throat. “Maybe Ellen was right and she did have an illness of some sort. Maybe I caught it and need to go home, before the play starts.”

“I think not.” Calvin put his hand on her arm, steering her toward the boxes. “Answer my question, please.”

“What question?” She could hear the squeak in her voice. “And where are we going? Ellen’s box is back that way.”

“Sterling had offered the use of his box tonight. It’s larger, more secluded.”

She did not object. If he meant to talk with her about things that were private, the Duke’s seats would indeed be better suited to the occasion.

“Beatrice, I came to see you last night, after the party. You were not home. Where did you go?”

She straightened her shoulders. “I decided to attend another crush, at the...Stamford house.”

“Really? I went by there, thinking you might have decided to attend.” He ushered her into the box, closing the curtain behind them. “Would you like to try another lie?”

“How dare you?”

His dark look made her quake. “If you are seeing another man I would appreciate you telling me about it. Now.”

Tears filled her eyes. “Do you think so little of me, that I would have one man in my bed one night and another the next?”

“No.” His voice was softer. “But it was the only thing that fit. You have rejected my offer of marriage because of another man, and you were with him last night.”

“I did not reject it. I simply asked you to wait.”

“It is the same thing, darling.” He indicated a seat and she took it. He sat down next to her, turning toward her. Beatrice knew he would study her every inflection, analyze every word and gesture she made. Everything had been fine until Vesta married. He had been perfectly willing to wait.

And now he was not so willing. Now he wanted her. She was flattered, and thrilled. But it had to be postponed for just a few more months. Until her problem was solved and gone. Then she would marry him. Happily.

The house lights dimmed and the orchestra started to play. Calvin put his hand on her knee and she gasped, trying to push him away. “We are in public.”

“Yes, we are. I read a most fascinating novel today, called *The Duke’s Mistress*. Have you read it?”

“No, I have not.” She focused on the stage, grateful it was dark and he could not see her blush.

“Then we’ll read it together. Shall I give you a preview?” He leaned closer to her and her body grew tight with need, not at the idea of *The Duke’s Mistress*, but in reaction to having Calvin near her. She always felt this way when he was close.

“This is neither the place, nor the time.”

“You see, *The Duke’s Mistress* is a series of letters from a woman to her cousin detailing her sexual exploits with her provider.

“Calvin! Not now.”

“They were very naughty, and did things that were more than a little scandalous.”

Her nipples tightened as Calvin’s hand went to her knee, his hand gathering her skirt material and inching it up her thigh.

“In one of those letters he takes her at a very well-attended party, gathering her skirts around her waist, bending her over, and fucking her while there are others nearby.” His hand was inside her skirt now, moving up her thigh.

“Stop that.” The words came out of her mouth but she didn’t move to stop him, didn’t push his hand away.

“I’m going to take you here, Beatrice, against the back wall.”

“No.” Excitement sizzled inside her. What would that be like, she wondered? Physically it would be thrilling. But if they were caught... “We cannot.”

“We can. Or perhaps you would prefer getting down on all fours. I know how you love to be taken that way, to feel my cock slamming into you.”

She spread her legs to allow him access, excited by the idea that his hands were on her and no one nearby knew. Her quim throbbed with need, and when his fingers dipped inside, his chuckle made her gasp.

“You are ready for me, so very wet.”

“Calvin, we...”

“Choose: the wall, or from behind.”

What had happened to the Calvin who cared what people thought? That Calvin would never propose something like this. Had Vesta’s marriage somehow changed Calvin overnight? It would seem so. She could not believe this was happening, that he was saying such things. Worse yet, she was considering them. What a harlot she was. And how very good it felt.

“From behind,” she whispered, looking down at the carpeted floor. She loved to have Calvin mount her this way. The feel of his hands on her hips drove her insane with need as he slammed in and out of her quim.

“You know what to do.”

Beatrice nodded, wondering where her senses had gone. Just because someone wrote about a sexual encounter in a fictional, erotic tale didn’t mean you should try to replicate it. But she wanted to. She wanted to be a naughty woman with Calvin. She set down her playbill then gathered her up her skirts, dropping to her knees.

What are you doing? Get back up you little whore.

She ignored her inner voice as Calvin moved her skirts to bare her bottom. He was behind her in seconds, sliding into her wetness. She did not need preparation; being near him, hearing him talk as he had just done, had prepared her enough.

They had done things that were considered different, having sex in her gardens and her taking him in her mouth, swallowing his seed. But this was beyond the pale for them both.

“Lie down on your belly,” he whispered into her ear. She did as he asked and when he covered her completely and slipped back inside her, she groaned.

“Shush, my love.” He handed her the playbill. “Bite down on this to keep quiet, if need be.”

He lifted up on his hands and thrust inside her in slow, measured strokes. Beatrice thought she would go mad with desire. She wanted to scream at him to hurry, to quicken his pace, to make her spend.

“Just think, my love, the next time you are at a party with these people, they will not know that you were being fucked on floor of the theater while they sat nearby.” His crude words only excited her more. She nodded with enthusiasm then bucked back at him as much as she could. So good, so very good.

“Good evening, milady.” She stiffened, her gaze flying to the doorway. It took her a moment to realize he was saying what might happen when she saw the people around them in the future. “Me, taken at the theater? You must be mistaken. I am a Lady. Except for Calvin, for him, I am his harlot.”

“Yes,” she whispered as his thrusts increased. He moved them slightly, placed his lips near her ear. “I am your harlot.”

“Make yourself climax, harlot.”

She slipped her hand between her thighs, found her hardened bud. It took very few strokes for her to spend, her walls tightening around Calvin as he continued to thrust. Rays of light seemed to streak across the box as her climax ripped through her. She bit hard on the paper in her mouth to keep from screaming.

Although, who cared who heard, she thought? She wanted everyone to know what they were doing, that they were in love and she wanted him by her side forever. Would do anything for him, and with him. She felt his body grow rigid, heard his deep voice whisper in her ear, “Beatrice how I love you.”

Tell him, tell him right now. She turned to him, opened her mouth to let him know about her problem, then quickly closed it again. “I love you, too, darling. Now take me home and make love to me properly.”

“Did you not enjoy our little tryst?”

“You are leading me astray.”

His kiss was gentle. “I would lead you to the altar if you would but say yes.”

Beatrice smiled at him, then stroked her hand along his jaw line. “Right now I would have you take me to bed. And I hope we can stay there for a very long time.

* * * *

Calvin accepted the key from Sterling. "Thank you."

"You are welcome. Are you sure you do not want my man to look into the matter? If you are sure she is hiding something, you want her to tell you before you wed. I would hate to see you caught up in something...unpleasant."

"No, thank you." Calvin had made this decision some time ago. "If she will not tell me on her own, then we have a larger problem than whatever she is facing. She needs to trust me, to confide in me. Hopefully this will work."

His new brother-in-law nodded. "I hope so, for both your sakes. You are obviously in love."

"I am, and she is, too, unless she is lying to me. She will be angry at first, I believe, but she will get over it."

"I'm sure you'll see to that," Sterling replied. "Please make yourselves at home, and have a good time. Maybe by the next time I see you, you will be a married man."

Calvin patted his pocket where the special license he had procured was enclosed, waiting to be used. "With any luck, you will be right. Say hello to my sister for me."

"She's out spending my money, and the thought thrills me as nothing ever has before."

The men laughed and shook hands, and Calvin went out to his carriage. "To Lady Morset's," he told the driver as he climbed inside. This was a drastic measure and he prayed it would work. He was not sure how many more nights he could handle without Beatrice in his bed, without having to worry about leaving, or who knew what they were doing. The risk they had taken at the theater the other evening had been thrilling. She had loved it as much as he did.

She might not like this next event so much. At least, not at first.

The carriage rolled to a stop in front of her house and he alighted, walking to the door quickly. Beatrice opened it herself, the butler standing behind her, frowning. She wore a beautiful green riding habit, and looked behind him toward the carriage.

"I thought we were going riding."

"We are. Just a different type of riding. After all, when you are in a carriage you are riding."

"True."

"And I do have the top down so we can enjoy the day." *And people can see us together before...*

“Well then let us start.” She nodded to the butler and took Calvin’s arm. He felt a tinge of guilt, but quickly pushed it aside. This would work; it would be perfect.

Once they were seated in the carriage, the driver headed for the park. They would cause quite a stir, he knew. People had seen them together, yes, but never *seen* them together, alone. It was their first true outing. If all went well, their next outing would be as man and wife.

The park was crowded, and they stopped to talk with several people. Calvin loved the attention they received, and he could tell Beatrice did, too. It was a good sign to him, one that showed they were meant to be together.

The afternoon had been spectacular, and when it was time to leave Calvin felt a sense of regret. He would ask her now to marry him, forgo what he had planned, but he knew she would say no, and tell him not to ruin what had been a perfect afternoon.

“Shall we go to my home for tea and...” her fingers danced up his thigh, “...other things?”

He returned her smile. “That would be most enjoyable. But if you do not mind, I would like to exchange the landau for the enclosed carriage. I am afraid it looks like rain.”

She nodded her approval and they headed for his house. At the stables down the block, he helped her transfer between the vehicles, then glanced at his stable boy who nodded.

“All is in order, sir,” the lad said. Calvin handed him a few coins and climbed inside. Once the door was closed Beatrice climbed onto his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck. She kissed him gently, her tongue a sweet invasion inside his mouth. He ran his hands up her back, savoring the feel of her, wishing he were touching bare skin.

“What shall we do when we get to my home?” Her voice was full of desire and he felt himself harden.

“What would you like to do?”

“Make love, all night long. I say we forget the parties tonight and spend the evening in bed.”

Oh, we will forget the parties, all right. “It sounds fabulous.” His fingers worked the buttons on her bodice and she giggled, trying to brush him away. He clasped her wrists in one of his hands and continued to work, soon pushing the material away, only to encounter her shift.

“You wore too many clothes,” he said, letting go of her hands and pulling down the shift. Her breast popped free and he swallowed her nipple greedily, sucking and nibbling until her soft moans filled the carriage.

“Calvin, you must stop.” She tried to push away but he held her close. “We will be at my home soon enough. There will be time for this later.”

He continued to suckle, pulling her closer.

“Calvin, what are you...” He felt her stiffen in his arms. “Where are we going? The man is taking the wrong turns. Talk to him.”

“No, my love, he is taking the right turns, to take us from London. Sterling has a small house not far from here that he has graciously offered for our use. In essence, I am kidnapping you, Beatrice. I want time alone so we can discuss your reticence to marry me. And when we talk this time, I want the truth.

Chapter Sixteen

“This is a small home?” Beatrice wheeled on Calvin. “Small homes do not have servants. Take me back to London. Now, before anyone realizes we have left the city together.”

Calvin started toward the house and she wanted to scream at him, to tell him to listen to her.

“Sterling says the cook is wonderful. I hope she has dinner prepared. I am starved.”

She hurried behind him. “Who else knows?”

“Sterling and Vesta, and Ethan and Margaret.” He turned to her and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her into his chest. How she loved to feel his body next to hers, savor the warmth of him. But she could not let this happen. Not now, when she was so close to the end of her nightmare.

“Calvin, please. If we stay here overnight—”

“People will talk? Yes, they will.”

“Have you so little care for my reputation?”

He ran his fingers through her hair, caressing her temple as he went. “London thinks Sterling and Vesta are with us. They left soon after we did, and anyone who hears of this trip will think two couples are enjoying an outing in the country. Your reputation is safe.”

He kissed her gently and she fought the urge to melt into his arms. He had kidnapped her and all she could think about was falling into bed with him. She pushed away from him, scowling.

“Take me home. Now.” His laughter made her anger boil deeper inside her.

“Darling, you want to go upstairs as much as I do. But we need food first. It was rather a long drive.”

He took her hand and headed toward the house. “You are incorrigible,” she said. “We have had this discussion before, and the answer will not change now.”

“We shall see.” They stepped inside and Beatrice was once again struck by how rich the Duke really was. The house was decorated beautifully, with expensive piece of pottery and paintings lending the perfect accompaniment to the furniture.

“I am not hungry,” she whispered. “I will just sit in the library and wait for you to come to your senses. Where is the library?”

“How should I know?” Calvin shrugged then turned to her. The predatory look in his eyes made Beatrice take a step backward. “I do know where the bed chamber we will use is, though. The first floor up, in the wing to the right, second door on the left. And perhaps you are right. We will eat later.”

He bent, grabbing her around the thighs. The wind left her lungs as her body hit his shoulder. Before she could recover enough to protest he was halfway up the stairs. He found the room as if he'd been there before, tossing her on the bed as if she weighed nothing.

“Calvin!”

“Beatrice!” He stared down at her. When she tried to move off the bed, he grabbed her and threw her back down. “I think not.”

He glanced around for a moment then tore a tieback from the bed curtain. She watched in shock, too surprised to fight as he wrapped it around her wrists and pushed her back, attaching the tie to a board in the headstand.

“Let me go.” She pulled against her bonds.

“Darling, I love you. I do not know how many times I have to say it before you believe it.”

“I do believe it, but this does make me wonder.”

“You look delicious, and you will be helpless while I make sweet love to you. All you will be able to do is lie there and enjoy every kiss, every caress, every thrust.”

Her body betrayed her, her nipples tightening with each word, her quim flooding as he moved to lift her skirts.

“Of course getting you out of your clothing in this position will be interesting.”

“Then let me go.”

“I think not.” He leaned over and kissed her, sucking her lower lip into his mouth. She groaned as he nibbled on her. “You know how I always enjoy a challenge, my love.”

He made quick work of the buttons at her neckline, undoing them with a speed that amazed her. When he got to her shift he shook his head. "I hate to do this, darling, but there's no help for it. I'll buy you another one."

"No!" The word was barely out of her mouth before he grasped the top and ripped, the thin material separating easily. Her breasts fell out, held in place only by the corset, which pushed them up high.

"Oh, maybe I am hungry." He lowered his head, one hand on each breast. He claimed first one nipple then the other, his teeth gently biting until she thrashed under him.

"Calvin! Please."

"Yes?" He sat back and seemed genuinely surprised at her words. "Is something wrong?"

"Let me touch you."

"Later." He bent his head back to his task, sucking harder than before. Her body quaked under his ministrations until she thought she would spend from his attentions there alone.

He lifted her skirts, then pulled on her pantalets. She lifted her hips to make it easier for him. "Hurry."

Had that word just come out of her mouth? He had brought her here against her will, tied her to the bed, and she was begging for him? What was wrong with her?

He stripped away her clothing, then stood and took off his own, buttons flying as he ripped the two sides of the shirt apart. When he was naked, she licked her lips. Her body was flushed with excitement, ready for him to dive inside her. She ground her hips into open air in invitation.

"Tell me what you want, Beatrice."

There were only a few words that fit how she was feeling at this moment. And she was not afraid to use them. "Fuck me, Calvin. Give me your cock."

He knelt between her splayed legs, petting the soft down of her mons. "Are you sure?"

"Yes!" She screamed the word, pressing up into him. "Fuck me!"

"Such naughty words for a lady. Shame on you." He slapped his hand against her quim and she groaned. The sharp feeling only made her want him more. She rolled her head from side to side.

"Please, Calvin, please." He moved toward her, placing the tip of his cock at her entrance. "I am begging you."

He pushed inside with one hard thrust and she cried out in elation. With him inside her she felt whole. His thrusts were hard and she groaned with each one, her sounds matching the grunts that issued from his throat.

Beatrice undulated under him as he claimed her masterfully. She fought her skirts to wrap her legs around him as tightly as she could, never wanting to let him go. Her climax built as his cock swept over that place inside that only he had ever found. He touched her on the inside with his hard cock, and touched her on the outside with his finger. She soared, her spirit floating above her body as pounded into her, groaning out his own climax seconds later.

She did not care about the consequences at this point. She welcomed his seed deep inside her, making her feel as if they were indeed one.

“Marry me.”

“Yes, a thousand times yes.”

“Tomorrow. I have a special license in my pocket.”

She focused on his face and tears filled her eyes. “Calvin, I have to tell you something.”

“As long as you are not telling me no, I will gladly hear anything you say.”

I think you will be angry with me afterward.”

“Do not worry, little one. Whatever it is we will face it together. I promise you.” He kissed her gently and her crying increased. She should have told him this the first time she realized it would be more than physical between them. But she had lost her courage and kept it to herself.

“Untie me, please.”

He undid her wrists easily, then kissed them both.

“Now, tell me everything.”

* * * *

“When was the first time he showed up at the house?” Calvin’s voice was deep with anger, and Beatrice reached for her cup of tea, taking a small sip before answering. They were in the library. Beatrice had changed into clothing that Calvin had provided for her. He really had thought of everything.

“A week after Walter’s death. He had papers in his hands, notes that had Walter’s signature on them. Gambling debts.”

“And for more than a year you have been paying DuBois?”

“Yes.” She put down her cup. “He told me he could have me thrown in debtor’s prison for not attending to my husband’s markers. Walter’s family refused to help, saying it was my problem, not theirs. All I had was the monthly allowance that I receive from the little bit of funds Walter had tucked away.”

Calvin sat back against the couch, placing his booted foot on the table in front of him. “Tell me exactly what happens every month.”

She went over the arrangement, how they would meet in the park after midnight after her money arrived on the first of each month. “He would send me a note, saying which day to meet. It has taken so long because I can only afford to give him a small amount of money each time.”

“Has he made any other gestures toward you? Anything unpleasant?” The word came out strangled and she knew what he meant.

“Aside from taking my money? No.”

“Good. Or I’d have to kill the bastard and go to the gallows myself.” He pushed away the table and stood, pacing the room like a caged animal.

“Do not say such things.” She rose to her feet. “You see why we must wait? In four months the debts will be paid off. I am afraid that...if he finds out you and I are attached he will...seek more money.”

She wrapped her arms around herself. “I did not even know Walter gambled. It shocked me. He was a mild mannered man. He never would...”

“Do the things I do? Like take you at the theater?” She blushed, then giggled.

“Exactly.”

He crossed the room and gathered her into his arms. “Darling, do you trust me?”

“With all my heart.”

“Then let me handle this. Let me make the problem go away. We can wed by the end of the week.”

“That will make the problem go away?” She could not keep the humor from her voice.

“That will make the both of us very happy. Taking care of DuBois will take a little longer, I think, but once we are wed he will make himself known to you sooner than your usual once per month assignation. And he will want more money, I can guarantee it.”

“I do not have more money.” She hated the fear she heard in her own voice. What was wrong with her?

“You will not need it. Trust me, Beatrice. I will not let anything happen to you. I promise.” He kissed her gently, then wrapped his arms around her, holding her close. Beatrice relaxed into his chest, savoring the feel of his warmth, his strength.

“We can stay together tonight.”

“We can stay together always. And no one will ever threaten you again. I promise you that.”

Chapter Seventeen

Calvin glanced across the room to where Beatrice talked with Vesta. His new wife beamed with happiness, and it made him feel more joy than he ever felt possible. Not even his anger at DuBois could change the way he felt right now. Tomorrow would be another story, when he was deciding how to deal with the lout. But now, the only thing he could see was the beauty standing before him, laughing, talking. Beatrice. His wife.

“How do you wish to handle this?” Sterling’s voice called him back to reality. “DuBois has no morals. I had my man check, and the markers are real. He preyed on Beatrice in her time of need, though. Truthfully, if he took the matter to court she would have probably won. His business is illegal.”

“Yes, but supported by high members of parliament.” Ethan put in. “I would say you should just pay him off, but I am afraid he will come back for more.”

“Exactly,” Sterling said. “He probably feels he has found an easy mark. When he hears of your wedding, he will try to blackmail her, tell her he will keep her secret for more funds.”

Calvin smiled. “I thought to write those officials, tell them that their secret is well known, then inform them that DuBois is probably blackmailing people all over London. If we threaten to expose his activities, perhaps they will put the heat on him.”

“Splendid idea.” Sterling’s voice barely contained his laughter. “But wait to have them delivered until I am with some of them. I would love to see the looks on their faces. I hate men who play with their fortunes with nary a thought as to what happens to their families.”

Calvin glanced over at Beatrice, who looked his way. “Let us write the letters now, in several different hands. Then we can give them to your man, Sterling, to deliver.”

“A paramount idea,” Sterling responded. “I am sure the ladies will love to help. Vesta.” He crooked his fingers and Calvin watched his sister sashay up to her husband, for there could be no other term for it. She listened to what he had to say, and then laughed, clapping her hands.

“What fun, to blackmail a blackmailer.” She hurried from the room and Calvin could only guess she was setting up space for them to write.

It was not ten minutes later that they were all sitting around the dining room table, foolscap, ink and quills at every station. They discussed wording of sentences, and how to tell the gamblers they were scum without actually using that word.

Within an hour they had all written a letter. They went round the table, reading them to each other. When the letters were sealed with a stamp that could not be traced back to the Waterford household, they all sat back and laughed.

“You know,” Vesta said. “It occurred to me the other day that there has not been a novel such as *The Duke’s Mistress* for a few years.”

“Vesta.” Sterling cocked his head. “This is not the appropriate time for such a discussion.”

“On the contrary; I think it is the perfect time.” She pointed to the foolscap in front of her. “We are all sitting here with writing utensils. Why do we not write our own story?”

“Oh, hells afire,” Calvin said, standing quickly. “I am sorry, but that is out of the question, Vesta.”

“Why?” She batted her eyes at Sterling, then looked at her brother. “In its own way, *The Duke’s Mistress* brought the six of us together. I say we pay homage, and create another one.”

“I say we keep it to ourselves, and use it only in private,” Calvin replied. “Who is with me?”

The men all raised their hands and Vesta pouted. “Well, I believe the ladies agree with me. I will write my own, as they might. Who knows where it might lead.”

Calvin turned his gaze to Margaret. “I believe you created a monster when you showed my sister that novel.”

“Thank God,” Sterling said with a laugh, crossing the room and hugging Vesta close to him. “I am more than thrilled with the results.”

“As are we,” Ethan said, pulling his wife onto his lap and patting her belly. “All three of us.”

Calvin looked around, then crossed to his wife. “And you? How do you feel about the results of Vesta’s reading of *The Duke’s Mistress*?”

“I have to agree with Vesta.” She stood and kissed him gently. “It brought all of us together, and that is a very, very good thing.”

“Yes, it is.” He picked up a letter. “Let us hope these writings bring about as much success.”

Sterling dealt the cards face down in a line. When he glanced up Vesta tried to read his expression, but it was blank.

“Are you cheating? I do not think it is fair for the dealer to be able to wager on the outcome of the cards.”

Laughter filled the room and she glanced at her friends. The six of them sat around the table. The mood was light and the other five all looked at her.

“It is near impossible to cheat at Faro, Vesta,” Sterling tapped the cards. “You watched as I shuffled, and I did not turn them over as I laid them out. You are just afraid of losing.”

She narrowed her eyes at him and tapped the first card. “Deuce.”

“And your wager?” Before Vesta could respond to Sterling’s question, Calvin knocked on the table.

“If I might suggest, could we keep the betting to only money? I afraid I might be traumatized if other bets are made. I am barely recovering from hearing my sister talk about writing her own version of *The Duke’s Mistress*.”

The opening of the door interrupted their laughter. The butler bowed as he entered. He held a small silver tray. “Your Grace?”

Sterling motioned him forward.

“I informed the gentleman you were otherwise engaged, but he insisted.” The inflection of his voice on the word gentleman showed he thought the visitor to be anything but that.

Sterling took the card from the tray and then winked at Vesta. “Show Mr. Dubois in.”

“Your Grace.” The butler ushered DuBois into the room. The gambler glanced at the table, then snorted.

“How fitting you would be gambling.” He stepped up to Beatrice and placed papers in front of her. “Your late husband’s markers.”

Calvin snatched them up. He studied them carefully, then glanced at DuBois. “How generous of you.”

“On the contrary, I have ulterior motives. I know you are the ones who sent letters disparaging my name to my other clients.”

The men all stood, but it was Sterling who spoke. “Are you accusing me of blackmail?”

“I would never impugn your name, Your Grace.” DuBois glanced around the table. “But someone has been sending out letters to those who frequent my establishment. Those people have started to take their business elsewhere and it has put a...strain on me.”

“We have no idea what you are talking about,” Calvin said. “We are simply enjoying a friendly game of cards.”

“So I see.” DuBois cleared his throat. “Lady Beatrice, it is my sincere hope that you accept the return of these markers in good faith and that the letters going out to my other guests will end, immediately.”

“Perhaps someone else you are taking money from is sending out the letters,” Beatrice replied. “Or am I not the only one receiving a visit from you this evening?”

DuBois did not answer. Instead he headed toward the door. “Enjoy your cards, even if the game is more than a little out of date.”

Beatrice tore the markers in half as DuBois walked out the door. “He is gone.”

“He is hurting for business,” Calvin said. “The letters worked.”

Sterling nodded. “I am sure he visited more than just us this afternoon.”

Vesta giggled, then took a note and tore it into little pieces. “More writing that worked beautifully. I say we discuss the idea of writing a novel. I think...”

“Hells afire, Vesta.” Calvin put his hands over his heart. “Please, you will give me a seizure. Let us just go back to the game. I say it is a four.”

As the others made their guesses about the first card, Vesta leaned toward Sterling. “I suppose I should not tell him I have already started to write the novel?”

Sterling took her hand and brought her fingers to his lips. “No, my love. Let us keep that little tidbit to ourselves, shall we?”

The End

16 October, 1880

My dearest cousin,

I received your letter, and by now you must be wondering what has happened to me. Please forgive my tardiness in responding to you. I am still alive. And I am still happy.

It seems His Grace's need to see me with Hector lasted for only a short while. He visited twice more and the scenario was much the same, the only change being that the last time His Grace only watched.

When I asked if Hector would visit again His Grace only shrugged.

"You miss him? You want him to fuck you again?" He did not seem upset, only curious.

"No. I am simply wondering, Your Grace, what will happen next between us."

His smile made me shiver. "Never try to predict what will happen next, sweet Melody. That is for me to arrange, and you to enjoy."

The next day he showed up with a gift in hand, one that he would not let me open in front of the servants. We took it upstairs to the bedroom. You may wonder what I was doing downstairs, when I was expecting him. After being greeted with two men in my bedroom, I had taken to greeting His Grace downstairs, so as not to be surprised once again.

But I digress from my tale. I have told you of His Grace's love for watching me with the candle. As you can imagine, the gift, a dildo, has something to do with this. Only it was not for my quim. When I expressed my shock he stroked my cheek and smiled.

"It is small and thin, and will prepare your backside for my entry."

I was adamant in my refusal, but His Grace was just as unmovable in his opinion. "You will remember once that I told you I would claim you in all ways."

"But I thought that meant with our mouths." I put my hands on his chest, stroking him. "Please, Your Grace. No."

"Do not worry, little Melody. You will not take my cock today. But you will take the dildo, and you will practice with it at least once a day. I would like to be here to observe, but if I am not you will still insert it into your anus."

The words sounded so cold, and they made me shake. "I do not want to."

"But I want you to, and you want me to guide you, remember?"

My heart felt as if it would seize and fall out of my chest as he spoke. "Not in that way. It is not natural."

"Only according to some. I find it quite pleasurable, and you will, too."

"It is easy for you to find it pleasurable. It is not your backside that will be invaded."

His laugh was soft and he stroked my face. "Do you not trust me? In all these months that I have cared for you, have I hurt you even once?"

"No." I kept my arms tight around myself.

"Would you like to see it done?" My heart raced at his suggestion.

"Where?"

"I know a place where we can watch, together." That he knew such a place did not surprise me. After all, I knew his affinity for watching people in the throes of passion."

"You want to watch a man and woman...do that?" His chuckle made me angry. "Stop laughing at me."

"I am not laughing at you; I only know that you are very naïve in these matters. What I am suggesting is not what you are thinking. But if you are up to the challenge, I will take you to the new place tonight."

"I am up to any challenge." I would not back down, as you know, dear cousin. It is not in my nature. He kissed me, his passion high, and then he pushed me back on the bed and tore open the robe. My cunny was ready for him, as it was whenever he appeared. Of course it is because of his demands that I keep myself that way.

He fucked me hard, pounding into me with such ferocity that at times I thought he would bruise my insides. The lovemaking was a little frightening, but it was also very, very exciting.

Before he left he put the box with the dildo in his pocket and told me to be ready at ten that evening. "Wear something very simple, and black."

It took me quite some time to find a proper gown, one that I had worn during my mourning period. I had moved all of those hideous dresses upstairs, but the one I selected was not so bad, a simple straight-lined dress with a tight fitting bodice. He had not told me to do so, but I did not wear any underclothing except for a shift and corset. I was sure we would have sex this evening, and I wanted to make things as simple as possible.

He arrived at the house at ten on the dot, and the carriage he brought did not have his crest on it. That let me know we were going somewhere he did not want to be seen. We traveled for some time, and as the carriage rolled over the streets he lifted my skirts to inspect what I had on underneath.

“Very nice,” he said. “Play with your quim, make sure it is ready for me.” I did as he asked, the sensation spreading through me. I was excited about wherever we were going, even if I did not know where it was. His Grace had never once hurt me; he was right in that statement. And I didn’t expect him to tonight.

As the carriage slowed I peaked, my fingers rubbing faster and faster as His Grace stroked my thigh. “That is good, sweet Melody. So very nice to watch.”

“Thank you.” I smiled and righted my skirt, and then he asked me to turn my back to him.

“Do not worry,” he said. “It is only a mask.”

It was black, or so it seemed in the dark carriage. He fastened it over my eyes and a small amount of material fell down my face. There were two little slits in it near my nose. I turned to watch His Grace attach a similar mask around his face.

The door to the carriage opened and a man helped me down. His Grace guided me inside a gate and into a house quickly. It was an enormous structure, with large rooms and opulent furnishings. And there were couples everywhere, engaged in various forms of play. They all wore the same masks.

There were men with women, and women with women, and, if I was not mistaken, I was sure that when we passed one room I caught a glimpse of a man on his knees in front of another man.

“Your...” I stopped, not knowing what to call him in this establishment, or what exactly to say.

“Call me Hector, as you call our friend.” I followed him up the stairs.

“Where are we going?”

“To see what you are worried about.”

I glanced back down the stairs, wondering what was going on up here that was so different from the first floor. We bypassed several rooms, then His Grace stopped in front of a doorway, opening it slowly. I had noticed a few of the doorways we passed had guards in front of them. They were huge men who watched everyone very carefully.

We stepped inside the room and I blinked so my eyes would become accustomed to the darkness. The sounds of sexual intercourse, specifically of a woman groaning, reached my ears. We bypassed two small areas, partitioned off by curtains that hung from floor to ceiling and came to a third that was open.

His Grace ushered me inside, then pulled the curtain shut. What I saw in the room in front of me shocked me. A woman knelt on a bed, her backside in the air. Another woman stood behind her, working a dildo in and out of the first woman's anus. The woman being fucked pleased herself much as I had just done in the carriage, and her cries filled the room.

"Are there other people in here, watching?" I kept my voice low and His Grace nodded.

"We stay at the back of this little space. If the curtain is closed it means that space is occupied. Do you like what you see?"

"It is two women," I said, shaking my head. "I would prefer a man and a woman."

"They seem to enjoy each other." It was obvious the woman on her knees had spent. Her hands were shaking as she lifted up, and the look on her face was one of sheer bliss. The women exchanged smiles and soft kisses, and then they changed positions. The woman on top selected a new dildo, coating it with something I could not see. I turned to His Grace.

"I think I have seen enough." I was not sure exactly what I was feeling, but I know there was more than a little trepidation at the idea he was proposing. But I am afraid, where His Grace is concerned, that I am very easily led. I knew I would participate, despite my feelings of unease.

"Enough to know it can be pleasurable?" I looked back to where the two women were on the bed. They did seem to be enjoying themselves. Of course they could be playacting, or they could have imbibed quite a bit of alcohol. I did not know.

What I do know, dear Cousin, is that His Grace had failed to guide me down a wrong path in the past, and I did not think this would be any different.

"Yes, it looks like it can be pleasurable." He stroked my cheek.

"You know I would never hurt you. If you, at any time, find it not to your liking all you must do is tell me. There will be discomfort at first, but it will pass, as you can see."

He turned my head toward the couple on the bed. One of the women inserted the dildo into her partner's anus. The woman's cries of "more, more, more," let me know she was not playacting. The insertion of the dildo brought her great pleasure indeed.

My excitement level rose, and my fear receded. Of course it helped that His Grace was caressing me, his hands roaming my body at leisure.

“Not here,” I whispered.

“Yes, here. Not in this room, exactly, but there are private quarters to be had.”

“Is this a brothel?” I’m not sure exactly where that question came from. One minute I was considering an act I thought never to participate in. The next I wondered if I were in a house of ill repute. I have to admit, dear cousin, the idea thrilled me.

“Yes.”

“Do you come here often?”

“I used to.” He gently moved hair away from my face. “Before I met you.”

“Now you have your own personal whore,” I said, trying to keep my voice light.

“Yes, I do.” He stepped in back of me, then pulled me flush against his body. I felt the hard outline of him against me and it made my body quake with need. “But I also have a woman I admire and care about. One that is a match for me in the sexual arena.”

He was careful, I am sure, not to mention that I was a woman who could live with him always, for I was not. He would marry at some point, and have children. I cannot help but wonder if he will want to keep me as his mistress then, but that, I suppose, is a discussion for another day.

Rather than bore you with great details, dear one, I will tell you that I followed him up another set of stairs. He stopped in front of a door where a man stood. He and the man had a short conversation, and then His Grace pressed bills into his hand. After we were inside I knew those rooms with guards had been just this, a private place for the customers to copulate, with either another guest or with one of the employees of the house. I did not inquire as to the amount of money that was exchanged, but I must tell you it gave me a silent thrill that His Grace paid to use this room in which to fuck me.

I will try to explain to you the change in the feelings that night. Maybe it was because we were in a brothel, or maybe it was because we were performing an act thought to be taboo, but my climaxes that evening was harder than normal, brought me more pleasure than I ever thought possible.

His Grace put his mouth and hands on me everywhere, and he spent once, in my mouth, before we performed the act that was his ultimate goal. I have learned to take all of his seed into

my mouth, swallowing it while he holds me close. Tonight it seemed to taste sweeter. Was it the fact we wore nothing but our masks?

You must forgive me, cousin, for I have just read over what I wrote and realized I had not told you that. He sat and watched me strip, his cock in his hand. It was enticing to do this, even though I had done it many times before. I think it was because when I made to take off the mask he ordered me to leave it on. It made me feel like an unknown whore, and I liked the sensation.

After His Grace spent he sat and watched me play with my body, as was his wont. At one point he stood, coming toward where I lay on the bed, my fingers on my quim.

“Not tonight, but another night, I will watch you with another woman.”

I shook my head in refusal but he just nodded. His cock was growing again, thickening as I stroked my clit.

“Turn over, my whore.” I was slow to follow his order, earning me a sharp slap on the ass when I was finally on my hands and knees. I must admit that, despite the fact we had played and I had spent, I was very nervous. He stroked my back and slapped my behind a few more times.

“You are too tense. Perhaps I should send for some opium to calm you.”

I refused this offer, instead relaxing my muscles and reminding myself that His Grace had never hurt me. When his fingers found their intended target I tried to relax. It was hard, though, as he found his way inside me. The initial push of his finger burned, and I wondered what this meant for the dildo I was sure was near his body, ready to be used.

His fingers did not stay long, or at least it did not seem to be long. When the tip of the dildo pressed against my anus the marble felt cold. It took me a moment to realize it was because there was some sort of cream on it to make it feel wet.

His Grace gave me no time to reconsider, pushing the tip past the muscle. I tried to dispel the marble but His Grace held firm, one hand on my hip to keep me in place, the other on the intruder. There was a burning sensation that quickly gave way to a strange fullness.

“How beautiful that looks,” he said, his voice barely a whisper. His words were like a caress, cousin, and when he pushed the dildo further into my anus I did not object. I am surprised at how quickly it went inside. There was a little pain, I will admit, but it soon gave way to something akin to pleasure. When His Grace started to move the object in and out of me as a cock moves in and out of a pussy, the pleasure increased.

He moved it quickly and my fingers went to my clit, squeezing hard. I spent immediately and the feeling was hard, a gratification I had not ever felt. I did not try to analyze it then, but I have now. I wonder if it was the physical act, or the mental part, or a mixture of both. Either way, what happened next was of my own making.

“Put your cock in me,” I ordered, thrusting my backside at him. He held the dildo firmly inside me and stroked my buttocks, asking if I were sure.”

“Put your dick in my ass.” My voice was deep with desire and His Grace complied immediately. His entry caused much more pain than the dildo, and he took it slowly. The initial burn made me gasp, for his cock is much thicker than the dildo, and I wanted to scream that I had changed my mind. Instead he stoked, holding me close. When my body relaxed a little he proceeded, feeding me his length until my backside was filled.

When he started to ride me the pleasure was immeasurable. I lay with my shoulders on the bed, my hands at my breasts and pussy. I climaxed immediately and he pounded harder. We both groaned and moaned from the act, and I felt naughty and wicked. By the time he had filled me with his seed I was panting for breath, shaking from the exertion.

He withdrew and left the bed and I collapsed onto it, worried now that I had done something I should not have, that I had allowed myself to be led down a path that could only lead to ruin. His next actions dispelled that thought. He stroked my anus with a warm rag, then lay down next to me kissing my shoulder.

“You are mine now,” he whispered in my ear. “Remember when I said I would claim you in all ways?”

I nodded.

“That means you are mine, forever.” He kissed my shoulder and I knew he was right, dear cousin. He had claimed me in every way possible, filling me in every spot on my body where I could take him. There was no way to deny that I did not belong to him, and always would in some way or another.

You are probably asking yourself where it goes from here, and I tell you that I am thrilled with the way it is. He has taken me twice more that way since the first night, and I grow to love it more each time. If I were to spend the rest of my life at his beck and call I would be thrilled. I care not what others think, for society knows I serve him in his bed. I am his in all ways, and can only pray he invents new things for us to try as time progresses.

I pray you are well, and not too shocked by what you have just read. Once again I ask that you try and visit. Please take care, my friend.

I remain, affectionately yours,

The Duke's Mistress

About the Author

Melinda Barron loves to explore Egyptian tombs and temples, discover Mayan ruins, play in castles towers, and explore new cities and countries. She generally does it all from the comfort of her home by opening a book.

Melinda loves to lose herself between the pages of a book. The only thing she loves more is creating stories from the wonderful heroes and heroines that haunt her dreams and crowd her head. She believes love is for everyone, not just those who are a size 2. Her books are full of magic, suspense and love, in all sorts of shapes and sizes.

Mel currently lives in the Texas Panhandle, with two cats, and a file stuffed with new ideas to keep her typing fingers busy, and your heart engaged.

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***A Dusting of Syn* by Melinda Barron**

As the seventh son of a duke, Keran of Bristol never thought to have his own lordship. So when King Edward IV offers him a bride and a castle near the Scottish border, he is ecstatic. However, when he arrives at the country keep, he finds that His Majesty's court is not the only place where intrigue resides.

Syndra of Mardoon knew that after her father's death, her stepmother would never allow her to be anything more than a servant in her own home. Threatened with the death of her friend if she doesn't cooperate, she hides in the shadows while her younger half sister is introduced to the new lord as his intended.

With the scheming ploys put forth by her stepmother already in play, Syndra is reluctant to believe that the handsome new lord can set things right at Mardoon. But one touch of Keran's lips convinces Syndra otherwise, and she finds herself surrendering to him... mind, body and soul.

\$4.50 e-book

Finding Her Place by Midnyte Dupree

The war is over and Cameron Cabot no longer knows who she is. Her life was enveloped and consumed by the fight, but suddenly things have changed. Instead of fighting creatures wanting her planet, Cameron is now fighting the urge to lay claim to two men who believe she is their mate. Has Cameron found her new assignment in the arms of a Noah and Mars?

Yes, if a mischievous little spirit has anything to say about it...

\$4.50 e-book

Male Me by Amarinda Jones

After Delaware Brooks sends a silly email about what she would like the new boss to do to her, she is called into the boss's office. The punishment? Every hot, sexual craving she has ever had, fulfilled. But Templeton McAdam is not the only new man in her life. His best friend, Speed is invited to enjoy Delaware much to her surprise and excitement. Two men. One woman. Their only desire is to please her.

Intense pleasure is one thing, but is it wrong to enjoy both men? What would a good girl do? And should she be falling in love with them so fast? But sudden love is not the only problem Delaware has. Someone is watching her every move and planning on teaching her a lesson.

\$4.00 e-book

Handcuffs and Lace

Resplendence Publishing's Erotic Romance Line of Law Enforcement Themed Stories

***Ticket Me More* by Tia Fanning**

Hailed by the bridal flower world as an artistic genius, Meli works long nights making bouquets for women lucky enough to find love, while she herself lives a life of solitude. She yearns to share her heart and body with someone other than Bob, her Battery Operated Boyfriend, but acute shyness keeps her from engaging the “living” world.

However, Meli's quiet and predictable existence takes an unexpected turn when she is pulled over and ticketed by the most gorgeous cop she has ever encountered—Officer Michael Johnson. Though he does not seem to notice her as anything more than a traffic violation, Meli makes plans to overcome her timid nature and seize the police officer's attention... using any speed necessary.

\$2.50 e-book

***Cuff Me Lacy* by Demi Alex**

Three months is way too long to wait for some simple, low-down, straight forward sex. It's not like Officer Chrissie Hansen is asking for prince charming to offer her the love of a lifetime. All she wants is a good orgasm that she doesn't have to work for alone.

At least with “The Bull”, she knows what to expect. But when Patrick MacKlick returns to her life and tempts her with new options, she discovers that lace can imprison a heart better than handcuffs can.

\$3.00 e-book

***Search Me Baby, One More Time* by Melinda Barron**

Wren Thornberry's life isn't going according to plan. She let her father talk her out of marrying Bryan Stockard, the man she loves, and moved halfway around the world. Now she's back home in Texas, babysitting her grandmother while grandma and her boy-toy work through their list of sexual exploits, making themselves the talk of the town.

But what Wren doesn't know is that things in her hometown are about to heat up even more, and it will have nothing to do with her grandmother. It seems that Bryan Stockard is still around, he wants to get back into Wren's life—by any means necessary, and now he has just the tools to do it: A police uniform, handcuffs, and the authority to make Wren... *assume the position*.

\$3.00 e-book

Melinda Barron's *Desires of the Lamp* Tales are at

www.ResplendencePublishing.com

Wish Me Up, Rub Me Down

With no love life to speak of, BBW Anya Bartholomew lives only for her job. This dedication has paid off. As a successful advertising agent, she has risen in the ranks of her firm to be the top moneymaker.

But at the insistence of her two best friends, who claim she needs a break from work, Anya takes a weekend vacation to the small town of Pleasant, Maine. While shopping at an antique shop, she rubs a lamp that looks as if it could belong to Aladdin himself.

Things will never be the same.

Back at work on Monday morning, Anya finds that her boss has given her a new account...for a lamp factory. However, her clients—two very handsome, very sexy men—are more than what they seem.

They're pleasure Djinn. And they have come to fulfill five of Anya's most secret sexual wishes.

\$4.50 e-book

Aliya Baban and the Cave of Pleasure

Advertising agent Aliya Baban is beautiful with a capital B. Unfortunately, she's also a witch with a capital B. In her twenty-eight years of life, she's managed to offend almost every woman she has ever met.

But she doesn't care, really. That's just the way life is.

When her boss tells her to get the *Cave of Pleasure* account, or else get a new job, Aliya takes her party invitation—and the strange lamp she's received—and attends the nightclub's grand opening, ready to do battle for her livelihood.

Matuse is more than just the owner of the *Cave of Pleasure*...he's a pleasure djinni. And Aliya has rubbed his lamp. For the next thirty days, she belongs to him. Though he intends to bring intense pleasure to her body, it's also his job to make sure his "she-devil" changes her wicked ways.

Will Matuse be able to help Aliya overcome her painful past? Or will Aliya fail to make the five heartfelt apologies she needs to make to the five women she has hurt the most.

\$4.50 e-book

To Rub, Honor and Obey

Moreen McGee is a perfect example of how poor decisions made in youthful rebellion can haunt someone for life. Now on probation for ten years, she serves her court-ordered community service at a center for troubled teens, in the hopes of stopping other kids from taking the wrong path.

But when one of her young charges pickpockets a wallet from her high school nemesis, Aliya Baban, Moreen decides to put the illicit skills she learned as a teenager to good use...by breaking into Aliya's apartment to return the stolen wallet, thus keeping the kid who stole it out of trouble and out of jail.

However, once she's in the opulent Manhattan flat, Moreen can't resist the urge to take one small token from the woman she still blames for her own downfall—an old, neglected oil lamp that she's sure Aliya will never miss.

Moreen accidentally summons a gorgeous demon-turned-pleasure djinni named Paran...and he's not too thrilled with the theft of his property. Moreen has rubbed his lamp, the contract is sealed. For the next thirty days, she belongs to him. And Paran intends to use this time to help his little felon learn some important lessons, including the true meaning of the words *honor* and *obey*.

\$4.50 e-book

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