



Gentlemen of Distinction

Penelope's Awakening

By

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Dedication

To my daughter, Hannah Lee. Smooches, sweetie!

Chapter One

London, 1814

"I'm so goddamned bored with all of those smug bastards I could spit. I'm bored with them, and I'm bored with you."

Penelope stared her inebriated husband, Ralph Jamison. His words were badly slurred, and when he looked at her through red-rimmed eyes, he closed one eye, apparently to get a better view of her, even though she was sitting only a few feet away on the opposite seat of the carriage.

"How long have we been married now?"

Penelope moved a curling lock of auburn hair away from her temple, smoothing the strands behind her ear. In a voice carrying equal measures of sadness and contempt, she answered, "Eighteen years."

"Are you sure? Seems goddamned longer."

"I'm thirty-six, Ralph. I was eighteen when we got marriage. I'm quite sure."

Penelope turned her head to look out the carriage window. She despised her husband every bit as much as he loathed her, though she had learned she mustn't put her contempt into words. The last time she had shown the temerity to criticize him, he slapped her across the face with an open hand. When she showed more anger than fear at being struck, he then backhanded her so forcefully she staggered several steps and then fell to her knees, bleeding from the mouth. As he towered over her, he explained that he had just given her a lesson he would repeat until she

remembered it.

He pulled a silver gin flask from the inside pocket of his jacket, removed the cork stopper, then tilted it to his lips. Then, obscenely, he held the upside-down flask over his mouth and lolled his pink tongue out to catch the last few drops of liquor.

The words, *Haven't you had enough?* were nearly out of Penelope's mouth before she stopped them. In the foul mood Ralph was in tonight, he would surely resort, once again, to violence, should she openly disrespect him.

The manual dexterity necessary to put the stopper back into the flask exceeded Ralph's abilities. The cork fell from his fingers. Ralph started to pick it up off the floor of the carriage, but when he leaned forward, he very nearly tumbled out of his seat. With a shrug of resignation, he put the flask back into his coat pocket, rested his head against the supple leather of the seat cushion, closed his eyes, and began to snore.

How did he ever end up like that? Penelope narrowed her eyes at her husband and his drunken snoring. How did I ever end up like this? I've been publicly embarrassed more times than I can remember. My friends pity me. I don't even have any children to love. I'm a thirty-six year old woman married to a vicious boor who spends my money and hates the sight of me.

She was grateful for the faint breeze blowing into the compartment through the open windows. The ball at the Xenos Family's lavish Kensington estate had been unpleasantly warm, and though there were plenty of cool drinks to quench the thirst, she had been careful not to sip too much champagne. With Ralph gulping down gin as if it were water, she knew she would have difficulty with him before the night was through.

She stared out the window, her eyes open but unseeing as the well-appointed carriage rattled along through the streets of London. Thoroughly exhausted, more emotionally than physically, she wanted nothing more than to crawl between the sheets of her bed and sleep until the next midday.

"Claxton, how much further until we're home?" Penelope called

out the window to her hired man, who drove the two-horse team with a firm, confident hand.

"About another thirty minutes, m'lady," Claxton replied from the coachman's seat. "Would you like me to hurry the horses a bit? It won't be any bother."

"It'll be a bother to the horses," she said, smiling to herself. Just because Ralph made life unnecessarily difficult for her didn't mean she should make the horses work harder than necessary. "Let the horses be. We'll get home soon enough, I suppose."

But a moment later, she heard the reins slap lightly against the team of tall, thick-chested roan geldings, and felt the carriage lurch a bit as they picked up speed. She smiled. Claxton McWilliams had been working for the Jamisons for three years—ever since Ralph had taken a riding crop to the previous coachman for no good reason.

As she often did whenever Ralph's behavior troubled her, Penelope closed her eyes and thought about the orphanage she sponsored. What were the next big challenges to overcome? There was the carpenter who needed help—the one who had hurt himself while building the addition. He and his family would have to be taken care of until he could work again. And there was the legal issue of how long the lease was enforceable at the orphanage. Penelope would have to see her barrister again about that thorny issue.

She sighed wearily. There were so many orphans in London, and so few people who wanted to adopt them. Yes, there were plenty of husbands and wives who wanted to adopt, but the children they would adopt had to come from families of a certain privileged background. Penelope had explained to people a hundred times that it was the children from *poor* families who needed adoption, not children from the ton. Her words, almost invariably, fell upon deaf ears. But someday, just maybe, she'd be able to find homes and families for all the children who so desperately needed them. Someday, if she worked very diligently and with great purpose, she would be able to...

The carriage turned. Blinking her eyes, she came out of her reverie, recognizing the stone archway leading into her ancestral estate. Home, at

last. Quite suddenly, she didn't feel at all tired. Perhaps another letter to the vicar in Southwick who had shown so much concern for the orphans would be just what he needed to go from merely being concerned to taking positive action.

Ralph's uneven snoring drew her attention as the carriage rattled along the cobblestone driveway leading to the estate. What to do about him? It wouldn't bother her at all if her husband spent the entire night in the carriage. But if she left him in the carriage, there would be a vicious row come morning when he would be red-eyed with anger while a pounding hangover beat in his brain. No, she would simply have to wake him and help him to bed, as she had so many times during the last years of their marriage.

The carriage came to a stop at the front doors, and her cheeks heated with embarrassment. A moment later, the carriage door opened and Claxton reached in to pull down the twin steps. He looked at Ralph first, pursed his lips into a thin line of disdain, then turned toward her.

"M'lady, why don't you just get the doors for me, and I'll carry Master Jamison in myself?"

Penelope looked at Claxton and gave him a sad smile. "No," she said in a whisper. "You have many duties with us, but being a nurse to my husband isn't one of them."

Claxton shook his head and took off his hat. He combed fingers through his thick, blond hair, smoothing the strands back from his forehead. "Please, let me be of service, m'lady." The right side of his mouth pulled up in a half-smile, and a dimple formed in his cheek. "I'm big and strong, m'lady. My father always said that if the dray horse ever went lame, he could put the harness on me and never lose so much as a half day of plowing in the fields."

Despite herself and the circumstances, Penelope laughed softly. "Did your father really say such a thing?"

"No, but I thought you might like to hear it."

The honesty of Claxton's reply caught her by surprise. She looked into his eyes, and an oppressive silence came over the carriage for several seconds. Finally, when the silence became difficult to bear, she whispered,

"I've heard about your reputation with the ladies, Claxton. I see now the stories are probably true. And I'll bet it is your gift of making women smile which makes you so..." She searched for a word that wouldn't be too graphic before settling on, "...popular."

"Might be the case, Lady Jamison, but there's no crime in making the ladies smile."

Claxton looked straight into her eyes, unsettling her. It was as though he could see into her soul—and it wasn't something she wanted. With some difficulty, she looked away, the hint of a nervous smile touching her lips, and warming her cheeks and ears with embarrassment. Her breathing turned into shallow, uneven gulps.

"No, indeed, Claxton," Penelope said at last. "And if your offer of assistance is still good, helping me with—" Unwilling to speak his name, she nodded in her husband's direction. "—*him*, I would be very appreciative."

One couldn't see Claxton in his livery without being aware of his size, particularly across the chest and shoulders, but even so, when she watched her hired man easily lift Ralph out of the carriage, carrying him beneath his arms and knees, a faint shudder went through her. The man didn't even appear to strain as he carried the unconscious Ralph up the front marble steps to the estate.

"I'll get the door for you," she said. As she hurried up the steps, her full, heavy breasts bounced in the low décolletage of her fashionable Empire gown. Suddenly aware of their movement and of the slick friction of a silk chemise against her nipples, a flush of heat went through her—a sensation she had experienced only a few times in her life, and never in the past dozen years.

She opened the door wide. As Claxton entered, he had to turn sideways, but didn't turn quite enough to prevent Ralph's head from hitting the doorframe. The unconscious man grunted as his skull bounced off the solid oak, and though he twitched, he did not open his eyes.

"Sorry, m'lady. Didn't mean it."

"Don't give it another thought," she replied, seeing the strength in Claxton's biceps as they strained against the fine blue linen of his livery

frock coat. "He deserves it, and worse."

She was grateful she had instructed her servants to not wait up for their return from the Xenos' dance. Even though they were her servants and were supposed to keep all happenings within the household in the strictest of confidences, she knew they gossiped. The fewer people who knew just how swinish Ralph's behavior had become, the better.

At the top of the stairs, Penelope turned to watch Claxton ascend. "His bedroom is the third door on the left." And then, for reasons she couldn't fathom, she added, "Mine is the third door on the right."

For only a moment, Claxton's gaze met with hers. She cursed herself for telling the servant where her bedroom was, and though she tried to dismiss the statement as simply her own nerves causing her to talk too much, she realized it wasn't entirely true. Yes, she was embarrassed, but Ralph's behavior often embarrassed her. Never before had she felt the need to inform the hired help of the sleeping arrangement she had with her husband.

She hurried to Ralph's bedchambers. Opening the door, she found the servants had left a single candle alight on the bedside table. Judging from the size of the candle, she suspected it had been placed in the room less than an hour earlier.

Claxton carried the unconscious man to the bed and put him down. Even though he had carried her husband up a flight of stairs and down a rather long hallway, Claxton didn't even breathe hard. It was clear he had labored, but it seemed to have required minimal effort for him to carry from the carriage the five-foot-five-inch tall man.

"Thank you, Claxton," Penelope said, keeping her voice low. The draperies were open, allowing in the moonlight, though it was still quite dark in the bedroom. "I appreciate your service very much."

After giving the bottom hem of his waistcoat a tug to straighten it, Claxton nodded and smiled. "My pleasure, Lady Jamison. And should—"

"Please, after what you've seen tonight, I don't think you have to be quite so formal with me when we're alone." A shiver went up her spine. Words seemed to tumble out of her mouth without any conscious thought of her own tonight. "You may refer to me as Lady Penelope." She

looked away and briefly caught her lower lip between her teeth. Almost in a whisper, she added, "If you like."

"I like very much, Lady Penelope."

Ralph coughed then snored once again. Penelope was thankful for the diversion, because she simply couldn't understand her body's sudden reaction to Claxton's blatant masculine allure.

She looked down at Ralph, hating him for his weakness, hating him for his cruelty and pettiness. She had not wanted to marry him, but her father had insisted, and with the family fortune being a considerable one, having the right man to manage those finances was critical.

Oh, Papa, if you only knew how foolishly this man spends the money you worked so hard to earn.

"Thank you, Claxton. I can take care of matters from here." She began loosening Ralph's cravat.

Without being asked, Claxton removed Ralph's buckled shoes and placed them silently on the floor. "You're sure you don't need anything else, m'lady?"

"I'm sure. And once again...thank you."

Claxton knew it was time for him to leave Lady Penelope, but a soft and insistent voice refused to be silent, whispering he must stay.

She was standing less than ten feet away, and since she was looking down at her besotted husband, he allowed himself a leisurely view of her. From the first moment he had seen his new employer three years earlier, he had been aware of her beauty, but never more than now. After having spent four hours at the Xenos' dance, her upswept coiffure had come partially unpinned, and auburn tendrils trailed down the sides of her face. Irrationally, Claxton wondered what her reaction would be if he closed the ten feet separating them and removed her hairpins to let those luxurious tresses tumble down over her bare shoulders.

Her eyes were emerald green, the color of priceless jewels, but more often than not, they were filled with worry, fear, or doubt. On only the rarest of occasions in the past three years had he seen her eyes alight with mischief or amusement. Far too often, he had seen her lovely green eyes when she glanced his way, looking to see if he had heard her

husband's latest insult, his most recent invective. Duty bound to ignore Lord Jamison's ignominious behavior toward his wife, Claxton had kept his growing contempt to himself. But as he stood in Ralph's bedroom, looking at a lovely and voluptuous woman, he felt an overwhelming urge to protect the intrinsically sweet-natured woman.

Protect...and something else. His desires were not merely altruistic, despite his ardent efforts at keeping them honorable.

Then, as though the gods had conspired to test his willpower, Penelope leaned over at the waist to lightly touch the bump Ralph had gotten when he struck the entranceway's doorframe. Her white silk evening gown, with its fashionable décolletage nearly skimming the upper edges of her areolas, seemed to struggle to contain the bounty of her extravagantly rounded breasts.

When she stood upright again, Claxton saw in her eyes what he had so hoped to see—*delight!*

"I get the feeling my husband's headache is going to be particularly keen tomorrow morning. He's getting a rather deserving lump on that thick skull of his."

"I'm real sorry, m'lady."

"Don't be. I'm not sorry you did it." She looked at Claxton for a moment, and then her brow furrowed before quickly smoothing, as though she had momentarily forgotten something important, but then suddenly remembered it. "How is the new boy working out? The one whose safety you were so concerned about."

"His name is Aiden, m'lady. Aiden Woodsley. He's working out just fine. I feel confident he can be your coachman if I've got other duties to attend. He works hard, and he listens to my orders and follows them through to the letter." He glanced at the snoring man in the nearby bed, and his mouth quirked in disdain. "I want you to know how appreciative I am—you hiring the boy on, even though he didn't have any references. Where he was, he would have been dead before he turned twenty-one."

"You said he was in great danger, and I believed you," she said, stepping closer. "Was the man of the house a drinker, like my husband?"

He shrugged his shoulders and gave his head an almost

imperceptible shake. "The man wasn't a drinker, though Aiden told me the woman was. Either way, in time both of them would have destroyed the boy's soul. He's only a lad of nineteen. Too young for a boy to lose his soul."

Penelope stepped closer and cast in pale, flickering candlelight and shadows, her beauty was ethereal, faintly ghostly, as though something slightly more than merely mortal.

"Sometime you must tell me the truth about Aiden," she whispered. "The complete truth, not the highly abbreviated summation of facts you've given me so far."

"Of course, Lady Penelope," he said, smiling, pleased she so easily saw through his subterfuge. "Now, I think I should go tend to the horses and the carriage." He nodded respectfully to her, fighting against the urge to take her into his arms. "If there's anything you need...."

He turned and walked out of the Lord Jamison's bedroom, thinking that if he should ever earn such a woman's affections, he wouldn't soil his mind and body with excesses of gin.

Chapter Two

In her own bedroom, Penelope sat in her favorite rocker in front of the open second-story windows, a glass of Chianti wine in hand, a single candle burning on the small table beside her. She had not yet readied herself for bed, though she had removed her over-the-elbow gloves that were *de rigueur* when wearing an evening gown which left the shoulders bare. She had also unpinned her hair to let it fall in loose curls down her back.

She sipped her wine, staring out at the moonlight, enjoying the gentle breeze playing over her body. It had been a long night. At the Xenos' dance, she had been fortunate enough to spend thirty uninterrupted minutes with one of her dearest friends for the past two decades, Fiona Xenos, who at thirty-seven was just a year older than her. Fiona, too, was shackled in a marriage that had evolved from blissful, to sourly unpleasant, to appalling. Because of the similarities in their marital circumstances and their stations in life, Penelope and Fiona were able to unburden themselves to each other without the fear of either gossip or disapproval. Though she didn't want to do it too often, it felt good to talk to a friend about Ralph's increasingly cruel and even sadistic behavior.

But it was not long before thoughts of Claxton drifted through Penelope's consciousness, causing a dreamy smile. It was easier to appreciate his rather harsh masculinity when he was no longer in the same room with her. There was an animal virility to Claxton so different from the dashing and wealthy young men of the ton. With Claxton, the

barbarian was never far from the surface, always lurking just beyond view. He could be unintentionally frightening, just as he could be unintentionally stimulating.

When he had first taken employment with them, she had inquired into his background. She eventually learned, through credible sources, of serious charges leveled against him in Edinburgh. While working as a coachman for a wealthy family, he was witness to his employer's son attempting to rape a peasant girl. The beating Claxton gave the arrogant whelp was of such severity no woman would ever again consider the young man handsome, no matter how much money she stood to marry. The fact that Claxton did not know the girl he saved only added juicy details to the gossip swirling through the city. For a time, it appeared Claxton would face charges for the beating, but with nearly a dozen witnesses willing to testify the only crime committed was the prevention of a brutal rape, the incident was allowed to fade into obscurity. Apparently, wealth could buy only so many advantages in Edinburgh, one of them not being complete immunity from the law.

However, Claxton soon got word of a bounty placed on his head. The whelp's father had guaranteed the equivalent in gold coin of one thousand pounds British sterling to any man who delivered Claxton's head in a sack. Though Claxton knew he was generally liked around Edinburgh, he also knew a man could live a long time on so much gold, which could be incentive enough to turn traitor. Though he loathed the notion of running away, he soon saddled his horse and headed for London. He'd heard there were always gentlemen of leisure in search of a strong man who was good with horses, a man who followed orders and knew his place in society.

Penelope recalled how easily Claxton had carried Ralph, and how the fabric of his jacket had tightened around his biceps when they flexed. In a fight, such arms would deliver devastating blows, and any thought she might have harbored about the rumors of Claxton saving the girl and soundly thrashing her attacker vanished.

He protected the girl in Edinburgh, and he protected Aiden. He flinches when Ralph insults her, but he doesn't dare say anything because

he knows he'll lose his job. What a bastard her husband was. Claxton was a good man...a better man than he lets on. A beaming smile broke out on her face. *Such a good man ought to be rewarded!*

Penelope hurried out of her bedroom, and at her bedroom door scanned the hallway, making sure none of her staff was about. She opened her husband's bedroom door and heard the alcoholic symphony of his snoring. Her slippers were soundless against the floor as she crossed the room to the large, brightly polished walnut bureau. On top of the bureau were half a dozen bottles of various types of spirits. She checked the bottles, decided against all of them, and then opened the lower cabinet door.

"Perfect," she breathed softly when she found her husband's supply of whiskeys and Scotches.

A year earlier, she had heard Claxton joking with the cook about whiskey as they laughingly tried to figure out some way of getting Master Jamison to buy more of it for *cooking purposes*. Apparently, the whiskey Claxton and the cook could afford wasn't the premium quality spirits the master purchased for himself. Having no personal knowledge of the subject, she grabbed a bottle and hoped for the best.

Penelope thought only briefly of returning to her bedroom for her hat and gloves. A well-bred woman simply didn't leave the house without gloves and a hat, but since it was already past midnight, and since she planned to deliver her present to Claxton and be back in her own bedroom within ten minutes' time, she considered her casual dishabille a minor sin to propriety.

How long had it been since Claxton had left Ralph's bedroom? Ten minutes? Maybe fifteen? She didn't know how much time it took to unhitch the team of horses from the carriage, and then properly comb, feed, and bed them for the night. She was aware such duties always took place, but she had never actually witnessed them done. Nevertheless, she was certain—or at least hopeful—that Claxton was not yet finished with his chores for the evening.

She was down the wide marble stairway and out the front doors in just moments. As she stepped outside, an overwhelming sense of freedom

struck her. So much of her life was planned and orderly, and yet here she was—outside past midnight without a soul in the world who knew what she was doing—with her hair down and her heart inexplicably racing. She couldn't remember ever feeling quite so daring.

The stable was to the east, and adjoining it was the servants' quarters for the outside help. Ralph's majordomo and Penelope's chambermaids, as well as the cook, all lived within the main house. But Claxton and Aiden, whose duties included caring for the team of horses as well as seeing to general maintenance of the manner, lived away from the more genteel activities of a sizeable estate within the city confines of London proper.

Standing at the foot of the stairs, the breeze playing lightly with her hair, she experienced a stab of misgiving. While it was not unthinkable for the mistress of such an estate to see the interior of her stable, visiting the stable past the witching hour held with it the appearance of impropriety. And visiting with the intention of delivering a bottle of very fine Irish whiskey as a gift to a decidedly handsome and masculine man most certainly was a serious breach in protocol.

"To hell with protocol," she muttered under her breath as she headed toward the stable.

Earlier in her marriage, before Ralph had become so bitter regarding the fact that the only money he possessed he had gotten through marrying her, he had teased her for being "prissy" in the bedroom. Back then, it was fun to be alone with Ralph, and to enjoy a glass or two, or even more, of wine, and let the inhibitions relax their relentless grip on her. On a dare, she had even said "pussy," and "cock," though she blushed crimson afterward. When Ralph tried to get her to say, "fuck me," she couldn't.

Later on, after Ralph's bitterness toward her had become poisonous, and his self-perceived injustices of life caused a daily pattern of rage, there wasn't anything delightfully naughty in using scandalous words with her husband. Where he had once tried to coax her into saying, "fuck me," now he simply scowled at her and said, "Fuck you."

Pale candlelight showed in the side window of the stable, and one

in the back living quarters. For a moment, she told herself she was being silly, and if she had any common sense at all, she would turn around and return to her bedroom, which was where she should be at this time of night. But her heart was pounding faster and harder than she wanted to admit, and even though she had seen the burly coachman less than fifteen minutes earlier, it seemed to her it had been far too long since last her gaze touched him.

Forcing herself to walk at a casual pace, she headed toward the stable, hoping Claxton wasn't so efficient at his chores that he was already ensconced in his living quarters for the evening.

As she walked through the side entrance to the stable, she was aware of the pleasing animal scent of horses. Claxton obviously took his job seriously and kept the stable very clean. After taking several more steps, what she saw stopped her short.

Claxton was standing at the side of one of the roan geldings, running a currycomb over the powerful animal as it munched on ground oats. The sight itself would not have been so jarring to her senses had he not removed his coat, waistcoat, and shirt. Naked from the waist up, his body gleaming in the candlelight with a touch of perspiration. She realized—for the first time in her life—that a man's body could be beautiful. As Claxton raised the currycomb and brought it down over the animal's neck and shoulder, she watched the rippling interplay of muscles just beneath the surface of the stable master's pale skin. The power, only hinted at when he wore clothes, was now revealed in all its primitive, masculine glory. Claxton McWilliams, she realized, was the epitome of unrefined, primitive power, and for a moment, she felt fear, knowing he was a man capable of great violence if sufficiently provoked.

He protects women, a small voice of reason whispered. He doesn't hurt them.

But then another fear, one too nebulous for Penelope to grasp entirely, came to life within her breast. What was she afraid of? Herself? Her body's reaction to seeing him naked from the waist up? She suspected this might be so, though since no man had ever drawn such an amorous, sexual response from her body before, she sailed in uncharted waters. She

was experiencing something—she just didn't know what it was. And then, startlingly, for the first time in her life, she was intensely aware of looking at a man and feeling her clitoris tingle because of it.

Claxton finished combing the horse and led it into a stall. It wasn't until he closed the gate and turned back toward her that he noticed he was not alone, and he reacted with a start.

"I'm sorry!" Penelope said quickly. "I just came in and...um..." She couldn't tell him she'd spent the past couple of minutes visually caressing him. Women of her social position simply didn't say such things aloud—they all thought them, naturally, but never admitted to it. It just wouldn't be right. "I didn't mean to startle you."

Claxton's blue eyes were wary as he replied, "Did I forget to do something for you, Lady Jamison?"

She heard the censure in his tone, and in his careful choice of proper nouns. By trespassing into his masculine world of the stable, he demoted her from Lady Penelope to Lady Jamison. She was beginning to understand just what stock she placed on Claxton's opinion.

"No," she said after a moment's pause. Facing her, the naked splendor of his chest, shoulders, and abdomen touched her senses in ways she had never previously thought possible. She felt her labia swell. "No, you've fulfilled all of your duties admirably." Her tongue made a futile attempt to moisten her lips. "In fact, so admirably I thought a little reward was called for."

When she saw the right side of his mouth quirk upward in a characteristic half-smile, and saw the dimple form in his cheek, she felt a sudden surge of confidence. Her behavior still baffled her, but when she saw not merely pleasure but *appreciation* shine in his eyes, she knew she had made the right decision in coming to the stable.

"I brought you something," she said, stepping forward, extending the whiskey bottle in offering.

"Before I accept, m'lady, decency dictates that I at least put my shirt back on." Claxton's grin broadened. "I didn't expect to see you, and it's been a muggy day, so I didn't see the harm in taking off my new livery so you won't be embarrassed being seen with me."

"Completely understandable." But as she watched Claxton hurry over to the railing where he had deposited his clothing, a small, impish voice inside her head whispered, *Tell him you don't mind! Tell him he doesn't have to put his shirt back on!* The tingling in her pussy became a bit more insistent.

As Claxton pulled the high-collared, white cotton shirt over his head, she once again watched the sensual, leonine rippling of muscles moving beneath skin. And when his shirt was properly arranged once more, though not tucked into his tight-fitting breeches, she was consciously aware of being far more at ease and much less discomfited by her proximity to him. Her clitoris, however, remained as aware of its surroundings as a gazelle surrounded by a pride of lions.

"I'm honored, Lady Penelope," Claxton said, a grin bordering on wicked playing with his mouth as he strode forward. "I can see by the label the whiskey's from Ireland. And though the Irish and me and have skinned up a few knuckles in the past, that's not a good reason to say everything and everyone from the country is without value."

She handed him the bottle and was delighted by his enthusiastic appreciation of her gift. He held the bottle in both hands, at arm's length, as one might a child for a more objective perspective.

"Have you ever had it before?"

Claxton shook his head. "No, but I've heard of it. It's supposed to be the finest of the fine." He looked at her, and his eyebrows lifted comically. "Too good for the likes of me."

"Better go get a glass and give it a try," she said, delighted now that she had acted rashly and left her home to deliver a gift, despite the lateness of the hour. It wouldn't be the last bottle of Irish whiskey he would receive as a gift from the unlikely source of Lady Penelope Jamison.

"One glass, or two?" He wagged his eyebrows.

She shook her head adamantly and, raising her hand with the forefinger extended, waved it from side to side admonishingly. "Not for me, Claxton. I enjoy champagne and an occasional glass of Chianti, but I'll *never* touch gin."

"This isn't gin, it's whiskey, m'lady."

"Any way you look at it, it's still hard liquor." She cringed inwardly, understanding gin was her husband's chosen poison. She made a conscious effort to banish all thoughts of Ralph for the rest of the evening. "And you're not supposed to tease the person who has just given you a gift."

It was Claxton's turn to waggle his finger in schoolteacher fashion. "My mistake, and my sincerest apologies. Now stay right here, Lady Penelope. It'll take but a moment for me to return."

His boyish exuberance seemed so thoroughly at odds with the powerful, protective man who had beat a man nearly to death for committing an act—attempting to rape a peasant girl—which many in the aristocracy did not consider a crime. Many of the landed gentry from London, to Edinburgh, to Paris, to St. Petersburg considered an attractive peasant girl fair game.

Alone, Penelope looked around the stable. It was clean and orderly, and she couldn't help but wonder what Claxton's living quarters were like. He was the kind of man who wouldn't simply assume someone else would clean up the messes he made. Though she had employed servants her entire life, she had never cavalierly left a mess for her maids to clean up. It was her mother, who had married into considerable wealth when she walked down the aisle with Penelope's father, who had taught her daughter to treat the servant-class with respect and dignity. Having met Claxton, Penelope more than ever realized there was a reason for such dignity.

Throughout the stable was an aura of stability, of masculine solidity. There was the feeling of one man in complete control. The saddles were arranged on an A-frame wooden contraption similar to a sawhorse, though much longer, all four neatly arranged one behind the other. She wondered if Claxton had made the apparatus himself, of his own design. For reasons she could not fathom, she hoped he had.

When Claxton returned, she noticed he had tucked his shirt into his breeches, though he'd left the collar and neck unbuttoned. He had two glasses in his left hand, and the bottle of whiskey in his right. The glasses

were cut crystal, and though she felt guilty for her upper-class suspicions, she wondered where a man like him would get such fine glassware.

"I brought a glass for you, in case you decide to change your mind." He grinned, and his boyish dimple formed once again. "It's been my experience that women change their mind quite frequently."

"And you've quite a bit of experience with women, I've heard."

The words were out of her mouth before she had the chance to censor them. She felt a blush creep up her chest and neck, touching her cheeks and ears.

"Well," he said with a shrug as he pulled the cork from the bottle, "you can't believe everything you hear, now can you?"

"No." She was thankful he'd made it easy for her not to have to explain herself. "There's so many nonsensical rumors flittering about on the ton a person would have to be an addle-brained fool to believe what's said."

Claxton poured a glass half full of the amber liquid for himself, then put a small amount in a glass and handed it to her. "Or, you could just avoid the ton altogether," he said, clinking his glass with hers. "There's always that option, you know."

She shook her head, staring at the whiskey as she swirled it around in her glass. "No, for some of us, that's not an option." The corners of her mouth turned downward. "Somehow, some of us lose options when we get older."

The instant the words were out of her mouth, she regretted them. She had come to thank a servant for being kind, not to pour her heart out. When she looked up into his eyes, she knew he understood not only what she had said, but what she had left unsaid.

"You've got more options than you think," he said. He took a half step closer to her. With his eyes locked with hers, he brought the crystal glass to his lips and took a swallow of the whiskey. He sighed, smiled, and said, "Now that's some fine whiskey. Why don't you give yours a try?"

She shook her head. "I really shouldn't," she said, paradoxically raising the glass to her mouth.

She took a sip, and when the liquor scorched a path down her throat, she put a hand to her chest, drawing his gaze to her rather extravagant bosom. She quickly moved her hand away from her chest, but noticed Claxton's gaze linger on her décolletage a second or two longer.

"I don't know how you can drink this," she said, exaggerating the discomfort the whiskey had caused. Claxton's proximity and his towering stature made her far more uncomfortable than any liquor. "It's positively dreadful."

With no expression on his face whatsoever, he said in an eerily calm voice, "You shouldn't have to put up with his guff. He doesn't deserve you. You're too good for him in so many ways."

Nervously, she took another drink of her whiskey, this time taking a full swallow, emptying the glass. As the fiery liquid went down her throat, she spun away from Claxton and coughed, bent over at the waist.

Claxton took her by the arm to steady her, and put his other hand lightly upon her back. "It's my fault. I should have known better than to give whiskey to a lady."

When the coughing finally subsided, she stood up straight. When she turned to face him, to look into his ice blue eyes, she had to tilt her head back on her shoulders because he was so much taller and stood so close.

"It wasn't your fault," she said quietly, unable to understand why her heart hammered in her chest.

"You should be treated like a princess, m'lady. There ought to be a crown of jewels on your head." He took the empty glass from her hand then tossed back his whiskey with a single swallow. When she stepped away from him, he set both glasses on the ledge holding the rasp files for the horses' hooves, and then closed the distance between them once again.

"I'd better be getting back." Her voice was hardly more than a whisper. "I've spent more time here than I had planned."

When he placed his broad-palmed hands upon her naked shoulders, a shiver went through her. *I'm not a virgin*, she thought, though she felt like one.

"If you were mine, I'd treat you better than the fool you married."

"Stop it!" She placed her hands over her ears. "I can't listen to this." She started to move away, to get out of Claxton's company, because her body's response to his blatant virility frightened her. But before she could get more than a step or two, his hand tightened around her left wrist. She nearly lost her balance when he spun her around to face him. When she looked up into his face, his eyes were fiery. He grabbed her by both wrists and raised them above her head as she put forward a futile struggle. A moment later, he wrapped the rope to the hayloft hoist around her wrists, then pulled on the opposite end until her arms were at full extension. He secured the rope to the belaying cleat.

Her eyes opening wide in indignation. He stood with his hands on his hips, surveying her from a distance. The blue fire was still in his eyes, but there was another emotion going through him now, and she recognized it as lust.

The rope around her wrists was coarse, harsh against her skin, and as she came to the full awareness that she was bound and helpless against him, the tingling in her clitoris intensified.

"Now you're going to listen to everything I have to say. You're going to listen because what I have to say is what you need to hear."

When he stepped closer, she was more aware than ever of his size. He was a full foot taller than she, and the breadth of his shoulders now seemed enhanced by her own vulnerability.

"Lady Penelope, just look at you." He spoke the words softly, sexual tension coloring his tone. "You're a goddess. A living goddess here on earth."

"I'm a thirty-six year old woman, not a goddess," Penelope replied sharply, trying to sound angry, though even she could hear the trace of arousal in her voice.

"You're a goddess, and I'm a twenty-nine year old servant who doesn't know his place." His heated gaze raked up and down over her body. "I've never been good at knowing my place in this world."

He reached a hand out toward her breast. She tried to step away, but with almost no slack in the rope, before she could move much at all, she was forced up onto her tiptoes. She watched, trembling slightly, as he

eased his forefinger between her breasts and inside her bodice, and then with an almost casual nonchalance, eased the finger to the side, freeing her breast by sliding the fabric beneath it.

"You need to be taught what it feels like to be a goddess."

"Stop it, Claxton!"

With a lifetime of giving orders to servants bred into her, nothing in her background had prepared her for a man who simply wouldn't listen to them. And though she wanted desperately to be furious with this tall man who had tied her wrists with what appeared to be a certain practiced ease, her body responded in ways she couldn't understand.

"If you were mine, I'd give you a thousand kisses a day." He bent low to kiss her lips, but she turned her face aside to avoid the intimacy. Her small act of defiance was blunted when he chose instead to kiss her temple, then cheek, and then her taut throat. His lips were warm and moist against her neck, and when his teeth nipped at her delicate skin, she uttered a high-pitched gasp of shock.

"Stop this, Claxton," she managed to say, failing to have the tone of indignation she'd hoped for.

As his warm tongue soothed the part of her neck he had bitten, he caught her exposed nipple between his forefinger and thumb, pinching and twisting with firmness, eliciting the maximum amount of pleasure while bordering on pain.

"Kiss me," he said, once more trying to capture her lips with his own.

A rising sense of desperation flooded her senses. When he caressed her nipple, heated desire coursed through her veins, spreading outward from her breast. Her clitoris, which had come awake to the possibility of desire from very nearly the first moment she had seen Claxton shirtless, itched even more than it had before, and the slick evidence of her own passionate excitement moistened the lips of her pussy.

Claxton moved slowly, a man in no hurry because she couldn't leave the stable until he decided to untie her. He eased her neckline beneath both breasts to expose them to his gaze. She twisted to the left and right in a futile attempt to defend herself, but her struggles

accomplished nothing more than to heighten her own rising desire.

"I would kiss these a thousand times a day, too."

Penelope held her breath as he lifted each of her breasts, then bent low and sucked upon one distended nipple. The pleasure was so forceful her knees threatened to buckle beneath her, and she would have fallen had her wrists not been securely tied by the hayloft rope. He drew a firm suction upon her breast, sucking much of the responsive tissue into his mouth. As his lips and tongue tantalized one nipple, his fingers and thumb tweaked the other.

"Ohh," she sighed, her mind in a whirl, her nipples feeling as though they were on fire. "Oh, God..."

Penelope was entranced with the lips and tongue caressing her nipples. When Claxton's hands slipped beneath her gown and petticoat and long, strong fingers cupped her naked buttocks, a moan suffocated in her throat.

"Claxton! Don't! Don't," she said in a frantic whisper, unable to deny—even to herself—that the strong hands upon her bottom intensified the heated tingles coming from her clitoris.

"If you were mine," he said as he got down on one knee, "I'd kiss you everywhere."

He raised her skirt and petticoat up to her stomach. Looking down between the trembling mounds of her breasts, she watched as he first looked up at her, then, with a distinctly predatory gleam in his eyes, lifted her leg up over his right shoulder. Then he brought his mouth to her pussy, and for a blinding moment of lust-induced irrationality, she thought she might die. When his tongue slipped between the lips of her pussy, she cried out in shock. The jolting pleasure she experienced was frightening in its intensity, especially when he dragged his tongue upward between her labia, then circled her clitoris with his tongue several times before finally licking the lust-stiffened nub.

Balancing on one foot, half-dangling from the rope surrounding her wrists, she had never known such disorienting desire. Everything she experienced was in the extreme. Though the rope around her wrists chafed her delicate skin, there was an eroticism to the sensation she could

neither understand nor deny. The rustic surroundings of a dimly lit stable, so different from her world of chandelier-lighted salons, now seemed charged with taboo desires.

"Oh, God...oh, God..." The words came out as little more than a sigh. When she managed to say, "Please stop," even she knew she didn't mean it.

Sounds she had never before heard drifted to her ears, adding yet another element of arousal to her senses. Claxton pleased her with his lips and tongue, sucking and licking at her labia and clitoris with a consummate skill, suggesting he was a man long accustomed to giving such intimate kisses to women. She had heard of her servant's profligate reputation with the ladies, and as she felt herself rushing headlong toward an orgasm, she now understood why he was in such high demand by women seeking pleasure.

Her own fingers had caused the only climaxes she had ever experienced, but this lack of experience did not prevent her from sensing that the orgasm quickly approaching would be a powerful one.

When he slipped a single finger into her pussy as he sucked on her clitoris, the added stimulation was all she needed. She teetered on the edge of the abyss for several seconds, the pressure inside her so powerful it was actually painful, and then she tumbled over the edge and into the void as a wrenching climax claimed her senses. Powerful spasms gripped her, the contractions causing her body to twitch and tremble as she hung from the rope, barely managing to remain standing on one foot.

When the last of the contractions had shuddered through her, her expression softened. All her muscles felt weak, and she was grateful Claxton had placed both hands on her buttocks to steady her.

"My...God," she said softly, her mouth open as she gulped in air. The surface of her skin tingled in the afterglow of the most wrenching orgasm she'd ever experienced. "My God, Claxton, what have you done to me?"

He chuckled as he eased her leg off his shoulder. "I've given you a lesson. Your first, I suspect, though it won't be the last you'll get from me."

Chapter Three

On his knees, Claxton pushed Penelope's gown and petticoat just a little higher up her stomach and admired her shapely legs encased in white silk stockings, her small, triangular patch of velvety pubic hair, and pink-lipped pussy glistening with nectar. With his other hand, he eased his middle finger between her labia, watching as the digit slipped easily into her pussy. There was a smile on his mouth, which glistened with Penelope's cream.

He slipped her leg off his shoulder and said, "I've given you a lesson. Your first, I suspect, though it won't be the last you'll get from me."

He rose to his feet, allowing her dress to fall around her ankles. Trapped inside his tight-fitting breeches was an erection aching to be freed. When Penelope noticed his state, she gasped, closing her eyes, and turning her face into her shoulder. He chuckled in response as he slipped his suspenders off his shoulders and then pulled his shirt over his head.

"I knew you were the passionate type," he said, easing his suspenders back into place. His breeches had two vertical rows of buttons holding his flap in place, each row just inside the clasp of his suspenders. "Open your eyes, Lady Penelope. Take a good look at what I have for you."

Knowing her curiosity would impel her to look, he waited until she opened her eyes before he unfastened the two rows of buttons. When the placket of his breeches fell forward, his erection, long and thick, sprang

out. A blue vein ran a squiggly line along its broad upper surface, the shaft angling slightly upward. He was pleased when her eyes opened wide in shock upon seeing his arousal for the first time.

"I have so much to teach you," he said, keeping his distance so he had a better view of her charms.

He liked her hair better as it was now, tumbling over her shoulders, than when she pinned it up. Her eyes were the color of emeralds, and they shone in the candlelight. Though the loose-fitting gown hid much of the shape of her body, the fullness of her breasts was an ostentatious display of femininity. Just looking at her breasts as they trembled softly with her erratic breathing added size to his erection and prompted a pearl-like drop of fluid to form at the slit in the tip.

"I've never tied anyone up before." His gaze went to her wrists above her head. The rope was taut, and he considered for a moment allowing more slack. Instead, he decided he liked her just as she was: securely tied with her back against the wall and her breasts exposed for his enjoyment. He closed the distance between them. "Lady Penelope—" He raised the sheer muslin gown up her legs. "—you've bewitched me."

He bent his knees as he slipped his hands beneath her dress. The feel of her silk stockings was a tactile reminder of the enormous chasm between their positions in society. His hands slid lightly up her legs, over her lace-trimmed garters, to her naked thighs, and finally, curling around her hips, he cupped the cheeks of her ass and squeezed.

"Kiss me," he commanded, leaning into her. "Kiss me now and you'll taste your own pussy."

She uttered a soft gasped of shock at the bluntness of his statement. Claxton smiled. With his right hand, he grabbed the shaft of his cock and rubbed the plump crown up and down over the length of her pussy's moist entrance.

"Oh, God!" she gasped.

He straightened his legs slightly, just enough to push the head of his erection into her, forcing her labia to expand to accept him. He saw her quick grimace and paused, well aware of his own endowment and how with some women, he had to make accommodations. He made a brief,

tactical retreat, paused a moment, then entered again—this time sliding slightly deeper.

“Kiss me. Taste your pussy on my lips,” he said, cupping her ass with both hands, securely embedded within her silken vaginal embrace.

He was only a little surprised when she didn't turn her face away from him again. He kissed her lips lightly at first, but then slanted his mouth down over her hers, leaning into her to press her against the wall. As he retreated a third time, he lifted her right knee high to put her hips at the proper angle, and when he next thrust, he drove the entire length of his cock into her warm, wet depths.

It had hurt at first to take Claxton's erection into her body. The only experience in such matters she had was with her husband, and what Ralph shoved inside her—back when he used to have sex with her—was nothing compared to Claxton's dimensions. But by the third or fourth revolution of Claxton's hips, she had taken everything he had, and rapturous bliss replaced discomfort.

A thousand conflicting emotions went through her the moment Claxton reached full insertion. When the tip of his tongue touched her lips, her mouth opened without protest. An instant later, her tongue was dancing with his, and the low, throaty purr she heard shocked her because she'd made the sound herself.

My God, this man knows how to kiss!

The instant the thought went through her mind, she turned her face to the side, forcibly ending the deeply intimate kiss.

He churned his lean hips, slowly at first. His size required some time for her to adjust. Once she ended the kiss, he stood straight, and the long length of his cock thrust deeply into her, taking her breath away. The first sensation was like being impaled, but when his erection began its gliding retreat, all she felt was pleasure. Each thrust, though, was slightly more energetic than the previous one, and he knocked her backward against the wall with increasing force.

She was conscious of a dozen different sensations, each one exciting her in its own way, driving her toward another climax, despite her having reached the peak of pleasure only moments earlier. Claxton's thick,

unyielding shaft created a slick friction against her labia, while the upper surface of his cock rubbed against her stiffened clitoris, exciting her more and more with each advance and retreat. The rope around her wrists was a constant reminder of being captive to a renegade who simply took what he wanted from life—and from her. His naked chest was against her breasts, her nipples hard peaks because of it. His left hand squeezed her tightly, pulling her hips toward him to meet his jarring thrusts. She felt the wall behind her, and in dim corner of her mind wondered if she would end up with bruises on her hips by the time he had reached his own climax. But most of all, she felt the totality of his cock, long and thick, driving up into her pussy, filling her more completely than she'd ever been filled.

"Oh...God...you're...big..." she said, spacing her words out between thrusts.

Again and again, Claxton pressed forward and upward, forcing her to crash against the wall. Each time his pelvis slapped against hers, the sound of flesh striking flesh rang through the stable.

"Come," Claxton said through gritted teeth as he plunged into her depths. "Come for me!"

It was as though words alone could make her body do whatever he wanted. He'd hardly given the command when her overheating senses exploded. A high-pitched keening sound came from her throat as her body shuddered, harsh spasms contracting around the invading erection. In the throes of ecstasy, she tossed her head back on her shoulders, and was only dimly aware when her head bounced hard off the wall.

She was just coming down from the heights of her climax when Claxton withdrew completely, then thrust his hips at her again, his slick cock trapped between his stomach and hers. He emitted a harsh, leonine growl as the semen raced through the length of his shaft. Balancing on one foot, she felt the heat and wetness of his semen against her stomach.

"Oh...oh...Claxton," she sighed, gulping in air. He still leaned against her, his phallus trapped between his body and hers. She could feel semen trickling down from her stomach to her pelvis, and the sensation of it was wickedly satisfying. "I thought I would die."

Penelope's Awakening by Robin Gideon

"Not with me, Lady Penelope. I'm here to save you, not hurt you."

He eased her foot to the floor, and then took several steps backward, allowing her dress to fall back into place. His cock was shiny with the juices of her excitement, and she wondered how such a thing could give her so much pleasure. She wondered, too, if it was unjust that it had taken her thirty-six years to learn a man's hard cock could allow a woman to experience ecstasy.

"Thank you...for not climaxing...inside me," she said between gasps of air. A weary, sexually satisfied smile touched her lips a few moments later. "Would you mind untying me now, or do you have other plans for me?"

* * * * *

Alone in her bedroom later, Penelope inspected the inside of her gown. Clearly, she would have to brush the garment clean herself rather than assigning the duty to one of her chambermaids. Matted in the fabric from the waistline, which began directly below the line of the breasts, down to about the pelvis area was the dried and flaky evidence of Claxton's orgasm.

Picking up her stockings from where she'd dropped them on her bed, she saw one of them had the evidence of her guilty behavior on it, too.

She smiled to herself and turned toward her mirror, her body still warm and tingling in the afterglow of powerful orgasms. The single lit candle cast her voluptuous curves in light and shadow. She touched her stomach and grimaced a little when she felt dried semen on her skin. There was also semen in the sparse triangular patch of curls at the apex of her thighs. It seemed the volume of Claxton's climax had been three or four times what Ralph's were.

I'm a very wicked woman. It pleases me to think I could inspire such a climax from a man like Claxton.

With her legs slightly parted, she watched as her hand—as though it belonged to another woman, not herself—went from the auburn curls

down to the pink lips of her vagina. Within seconds she was easing the middle finger of her right hand into her pussy as, with the fingertips of her other hand, she caressed her clitoris with a firm circular motion.

Claxton's made me greedy. I want another climax...and I'm not going to stop until I get it.

She closed her eyes, and in her mind's eye conjured the image of Claxton standing in the stable, the flap of his breeches unbuttoned and hanging down, his towering erection pointing ominously at her. She could almost feel the rope around her wrists, and the first pleasure/pain of taking his hard cock into her slick, receptive body....

* * * * *

Gerald Jamison leaned back in his chair and looked at his son, Nicholas, and said, "King George has gone mad and so has been replaced, which was the right thing to do. I think what we need the courts to understand is that your brother has gone mad, and in consequence, I should be made the executor of his estate."

Nicholas's smile was malevolent. "It would give you complete control of his fortune."

"His fortune, *my ass*," Gerald snapped. "Ralph pissed away what little money he had long ago. He's been spending Penelope's money as fast as he can for years."

Nicholas nodded. "So what you're saying is this: unless we—I mean, unless *you*—take control of the money soon, there might not be any left to take."

"Precisely." Gerald shook his head sadly. "Why do you suppose that brother of yours has become such a disgrace to the family?"

"About a year ago he and I were talking, and you should have heard the things he said about his wife. It bothers the hell out of him to pay for his whoring and gambling with her money."

Gerald made a face. "What difference could that possibly make? I arranged his goddamned marriage so he'd *have* her money." He considered the various ways he could assume control of Penelope's

finances. "We'll need the best barristers in London if we're to get the court to believe Penelope has driven Ralph mad. That'll be the key to it. We've got to make the court understand how Penelope's responsible for Ralph's condition...and then we'll have her money."

"We'll have trouble with her brother," Nicholas warned. "Sir Garrick Young is not going to sit idly by while we steal his sister's fortune. I believe he's a member of the Society for Gentlemen of Distinction. They have a very unsavory reputation for sticking together and protecting their own."

"He doesn't frighten me," Gerald said, but he knew he was lying.

* * * * *

"I dare say, m'lady," Margaret said as she stepped out of the closet with her selection for Penelope's morning clothes, "you get more lovely by the day."

Standing naked beside her dressing table, Penelope made a face and replied, "If only that were true."

"But it *is* true." Margaret had been Penelope's maid for the past twenty years, and she was nothing if not loyal to the mistress of the manor. "I speak God's own truth, m'lady."

As Margaret laid the selection out onto the bed, Penelope looked at them. While it was true she had the final say on her clothes selection, she invariably accepted her maid's selections, a fact which gave the trusted servant considerable pleasure.

"Arms over your head now," Margaret said as she picked up the silk camisole from the bed. "I understand you're seeing the duchess this morning, so I want you to look your best."

Penelope smiled. Though Francesca Wilson, Duchess of Shermley, was most certainly not the only woman of such noble rank in London, when one spoke of *the duchess*, the reference was almost invariably to her. She had one of the most influential salons in all of London, invitations to which were highly sought after. She was also Penelope's good friend of long standing. The previous evening a letter had arrived for Penelope

from Francesca, stating they needed to speak the following morning. The duchess was infamous for loving theatrics, but there seemed to be an undercurrent of urgency and danger in the letter.

The order of attire was the same as always. First the chemise, then the petticoat, then the cotton stockings—cotton in the morning; silk for evening—followed by the garters. For this day, Penelope would wear a gray skirt, a white blouse buttoned to the throat, and a waist-length gray jacket. Kidskin gloves and a small hat were necessary to leave the house in a suitable manner.

As she checked herself one last time in the mirror, she thought about a time two nights earlier when she had stood in the same spot and caressed herself into a very satisfying climax while images of Claxton and his exquisite body floated in her dreams.

"Are you quite all right, m'lady?" Margaret asked. "You look a bit flushed."

"Yes, yes," she said quickly. "I just had a thought, is all."

A frown wrinkled Margaret's forehead. "Don't be thinkin' about Master Ralph, m'lady. He's not worth the effort. I know it's not my place to be speakin' of the man in such a manner, but it tears at my heart a little bit each time I hear him say somethin' nasty to you."

"Don't let him worry you. I almost *never* think about him myself, and I like it that way." The clock chimed nine o'clock. Trying to sound casual, and succeeding reasonably, she asked, "Will Claxton be driving me to see the duchess?"

"No, m'lady. Master Ralph is going to be out-and-abouting in the city again today, and he requested Claxton hitch up the small carriage. The new boy, Aiden, will be taking you in the two-seater. He'll have it ready for you out front by the time you get there."

A stab of disappointment pierced her. She hadn't spoken to Claxton since she'd been with him in the stable, though memories of him had haunted her thoughts almost constantly.

As expected, by the time she stepped outside, Aiden awaited her with the roan gelding hitched up to the open, two-seat carriage. Standing at the top of the steps, she took a moment to look at the young man. She

knew very little about him other than what Claxton had told her, which really wasn't much. He was attired in the new livery purchased upon his employment. He seemed frightfully young, his cheeks so smooth Penelope wondered if he ever had to shave. He wore his light brown hair rather long, and it came down in loose curls held in a queue at the nape of his neck with a blue ribbon.

"Good morning, Lady Penelope," Aiden said with an open smile when he noticed her standing at the top of the marble steps. He opened the door to the carriage. "I understand we'll be going into Kensington."

"That's correct." She wondered if she'd ever seen such a lovely boy in her life. If she were twenty years younger, she would be absolutely smitten with him. "Do you know where the Duchess of Shermley residence is?"

"Yes, m'lady. Claxton has a map pinned up in the quarters, and he has me study it every night. He'll say 'Vauxhall Gardens,' and I'll have to point right to the map where it is, or he gets ever so cross with me." His face took on a guilty expression. "I'm sorry, m'lady. I know it's not my place to be saying how Claxton goes about his business."

Penelope allowed Aiden to help her up into the carriage. She gave him a gentle smile and asked, "Is Claxton a difficult man to work for?"

"No, not at all. He just has his ways, and he's got expectations of me." He climbed up into the front seat and picked up the reins. "Are you in a bit of a rush, m'lady?"

"I'm expected there at ten. Let that be your guide."

Chapter Four

At thirty-six, the duchess was the same age as Penelope, and they shared many similarities, including getting married within days of each other. Both had grown up with considerable wealth, though Penelope's childhood years had been primarily in London, and Francesca's had been spent in Paris until the Revolution, when her family narrowly avoided the guillotine by emigrating to England. But whereas Penelope's family had arranged a marriage which had proven to be disastrous emotionally and costly financially, Francesca's father had arranged a marriage to Walter Wilson, the Duke of Shermley. The duke was a kind, gentle, and generous man, though he was Francesca's senior by twenty-three years. In recent years, he had wisely turned a judicious blind eye in his wife's direction, a rational decision which suited them both.

Upon arrival, Penelope was escorted into the sunroom, where the duchess waited. As she stepped into the spacious, airy room with the high windows and the portraits of previous and current dukes and duchesses on the interior wall, she felt as though she could almost taste in the air the secrets shared in this room.

"My darling friend, you look spectacular, as usual," Francesca exclaimed as she hugged Penelope and kissed her cheeks. Even after so many years, Francesca still had a pronounced accent. Many thought she kept the accent just to give her the exotic air of a foreigner. Among those of the ton, only a handful was anything other than English to the marrow of their bones. "Take a seat, and I'll have tea brought. There's much I have

to tell you."

Francesca's delays frustrated her, which she suspected was just Francesca's way of heightening anticipation. It took nearly fifteen minutes before Jean-Claude, Francesca's gorgeously handsome French butler, carried in on an ornately engraved silver tray a tea set, as well as an assortment of cakes and cookies.

"Thank you, Jean-Claude. I wish not to be disturbed."

"*Oui*, Your Grace," the butler said before exiting.

"That young man is so handsome he could tempt a nun to sin," Penelope said once the door had closed.

"*Oui*, my Jean-Claude is lovely to look at." Francesca's lips curled upward at the corners. She wound tendrils of platinum blonde hair around her forefinger at her temple. "But he is no more lovely than my Russian servant, Josef, or my Swedish servant, Sven."

"You like surrounding yourself with beautiful men." Penelope shrugged her shoulders and sighed softly. "You've arranged your life to have so much pleasure. I envy you, my dear friend. I truly do." She leaned forward in her chair and, though it was entirely unnecessary to keep her voice low, whispered, "Do you have just the three, or are there more hiding in the wine cellar, or behind the curtains?"

Francesca smiled indulgently and explained in a rather professorial tone, "No woman needs more than three men, or more than one woman. Anything more is foolish vanity." She made a face. "And greedy."

Penelope's eyes widened. "Women, too, Francesca? You hadn't told me. I thought you didn't keep secrets from me, your dear, old friend."

The duchess spooned honey into her tea. "Let us not use the word 'old' too often. And Collette is a new addition to my household staff. I don't believe you've met her yet." She looked straight into Penelope's eyes. "There are times when I find myself intrigued with the gentleness of intimate feminine companionship."

Penelope smiled and shook her head in admiration, only a little shocked to hear of her friend's amorous expansion.

"But I did not call for you to discuss my servants." Francesca's tone had gone from playful to businesslike. "As you know, there is not much

that happens of any consequence in London that I do not hear about rather quickly. There is a barrister in town with a reputation for doing whatever is necessary to win. A truly vicious man who likes to go for the jugular vein. His name is James Watkins, and he has just been retained by your father-in-law."

Penelope's eyes narrowed. "Gerald Jamison? Why would he concern me?"

"It concerns you because what he plans to do is declare that oaf you tragically call a husband is incompetent to run his own affairs. The claim, my dear friend, is that you are responsible for Ralph's squalor, and therefore, Gerald should be named executor of his son's estate."

"Son's estate!" Penelope exclaimed. "It's my money! It's my money Ralph uses to gamble and buy his foul women with!"

Francesca rubbed her temple with a forefinger for a moment. "From what I have heard, James Watkins is going to use Prince Edwards' ascension to the throne after King George's insanity as precedence for assuming control of your wealth."

"He can't. It's. My. Money!"

"My dear, this is England, and you know as well as I that the instant you become a bride, whatever money you had belongs to your husband. By law, you cannot inherit anything. You cannot own property. We women have very few rights."

Penelope felt as though all the air in the room had suddenly been sucked out. She put a hand to her chest and stared at the floor, the injustice of the English legal system almost beyond her comprehension.

She had an enemy now. A flesh-and-blood enemy who was willing to do anything to steal, through legal means, the considerable fortune her father had earned and which Ralph had received upon her marriage so many years ago.

"What...what can I do?" Penelope asked in a whisper.

"I have made inquiries but have received no answers yet. This information I received came to me only yesterday. Naturally, I wanted to warn you as quickly as possible." Francesca leaned forward and patted Penelope's hand. "My husband is a duke, and his legal advisors are

formidable. We will fight for what is rightly yours."

"My husband...he's a fool. But my father-in-law is another matter. He's no fool, Francesca. I've heard stories about him, frightening stories. It is said he's not afraid to use a dagger to get what he wants."

"He's more likely to use a barrister instead of a dagger in this case."

Thirty minutes later, with the subject of Gerald Jamison and his hiring of James Watkins thoroughly aired, Penelope felt it time to discuss another topic—one requiring some assistance from her worldly friend, the duchess.

"Francesca, are you and the duke ever intimate?"

The duchess shook her head. "He is a darling companion when we are together, but we seldom are. He spends most of his time at his estates in Bath, and I stay here in London. There was a time when he was my husband *and* my lover. Now he is just my husband, but a more witty conversationalist you will never find."

"And you take steps to not have more children?"

The duchess cocked her head to one side, giving Penelope a searching look. "Of course, I take steps. My dear friend, perhaps it would be best if you—" A smile touched her mouth and put a devilish twinkle in her sky blue eyes. "You have taken a lover! You have finally taken a lover!"

Penelope smiled, blushed, and looked away. She had thought it would be difficult to tell Francesca the truth, but now that her dalliance was known, she felt only great relief.

"You will need Danish sponges, and they are not easy to get without word getting around," Francesca said, still smiling, though her tone had become more serious. "Danish sponges work the best, they are easy to use and fit in a woman's handbag." She nibbled on her lower lip. "And this lover of yours, he is big?" She put her hands up, putting them far apart, then very close together, then far apart again. "Big enough to give you pleasure?"

Penelope's blush heated even more. "He's almost *too* big. Before him, there has only been Ralph, and he's not..." She let the words die away. She had been in enough whispered conversations with friends to

know, at least through second-hand knowledge, that her husband's organ was woefully undersized.

Francesca rose from her chair, went to the corner of the room, and gave the braided velvet bellpull three firm tugs. She was barely back in her chair before the door opened and a young woman in a cream-colored chambermaid's dress stepped in and crossed the room.

"You wish to see me, Your Grace?"

Penelope felt a rush of excitement go through her veins at seeing her friend's newest chambermaid. The girl—and a girl she was because Penelope suspected she couldn't be more than eighteen or nineteen—was short, slender, her features delicate, her mouth small, her breasts petite. She was attractive in a delicate sort of way, and Penelope tried not to think about what the petite girl did with the voluptuous Duchess of Shermley. About matters of *that* nature, Penelope hadn't even gossiped with her friends.

"Collette, I will need three Danish sponges." She paused a moment, considering. "And some of the Greek ointment, as well." She smiled at Penelope. "Just to be on the safe side. If you've been celibate for a while, the Greek ointment can help...um...ease the transition into a more active life." She grinned slyly. "Though it was created for those who prefer to take their pleasures in a more Mediterranean fashion."

Penelope was amazed that her friend delivered the statement without the slightest trace of embarrassment.

"And Collette," the duchess continued, "please see that they are discreetly packaged."

"Yes, Your Grace."

With the faintest nod of her head, Francesca dismissed her maid, who left the room without a sound.

"She's lovely," Penelope said, a blush warming her cheeks and ears. "Wherever did you find her?"

"It's a story for another time." The duchess made a motion with her hand as though to sweep away the subject. "Will you share with me the identity of your lover?"

Penelope hesitated, but not for long. "He is a servant. Ralph hired

him."

Francesca fairly bolted to her feet. She went to the window and looked out. "Is it the lovely boy standing with your carriage? Oh, my lucky, lucky friend, he is marvelous! Such a beauty, and so young."

"I'm sorry to shatter your expectations, but he is not my lover."

Francesca turned away from the window with a bewildered look. "And *why* is he not your lover? He is beautiful." She sat in her chair again and crossed her legs at the knee. "Now tell me how your lover seduced you. Tell me he is a skilled lover, or I will be disappointed in your judgment."

Penelope gave her friend several intimate details, though she kept secret Claxton's binding of her wrists with a hayloft rope. She just couldn't figure out how she could possibly explain how it had been wildly arousing to be tied up and helpless, that the rough texture of the hemp rope against her skin had heightened her senses and made her orgasm supremely powerful. She didn't understand these things herself, so she was certain she couldn't make Francesca understand.

"I'm guessing you've never used sponges before. If so, my dear friend, then listen carefully. I will tell you everything you need to know."

Penelope smiled. "I knew all along coming to you was the smartest thing I could do."

* * * * *

Gerald Jamison looked at the bookcases lining the walls of James Watkins's office. There was, quite literally, not an inch of spare space unoccupied by thick, leather-bound volumes explaining the arcane intricacies of British law. The books gave Gerald a feeling of confidence, letting him know he'd chosen the right man for the job.

"I know it has only been a couple days, but what can you tell me?" he asked, taking a chair facing the barrister's enormous oak desk.

"We'll have to go through the courts, as you had surmised, but I have found some members of Parliament—well, just one member, though I think there may soon be more—who would be interested in advocating

for our cause. A voice, speaking on our behalf and coming from Parliament, would be a powerful asset." His gaze leveled upon Gerald, who had a sudden sense of foreboding. "Of course, their help comes at a price. You were aware of that, were you not?"

Actually, Gerald hadn't considered bribery a necessity, having believed a shrewd and unscrupulous legal mind working on his behalf was all he needed, but he saw no reason to admit to ignorance. He said, "I am a successful businessman, Mr. Watkins. No successful businessman in London can be entirely naive about the benefits of bribery. Let's do try to keep our largesse to a minimum though. And please, make sure of the outcome before you start spreading my money around too freely."

"Of course, Mr. Jamison." The barrister showed his teeth in an expression that might have been a smile. "My clients always get everything they've paid for."

* * * * *

Penelope shrugged out of her light jacket, and began unbuttoning her blouse. It was time to dress for the evening meal, and she was a little surprised Margaret hadn't arrived yet at her bedroom. Margaret was a stickler for formality, and she always helped her mistress dress properly for dinners.

It had been days since Penelope had been with Claxton. She had seen him twice, but only from a distance, and on neither occasion had she been able to speak to him. Ralph had kept Claxton busy with a series of errands, the nature of which he did not explain.

On one occasion, she was about to be driven by Aiden to see her friend Fiona Xenos when she saw Claxton stepping out of his living quarters and into the courtyard. Their gazes met, and for several seconds, neither of them moved. Then she moved her gloved hand in greeting, raising it only a little for fear she might be seen. The motion wasn't much, but it prompted a full, open smile from him. The smile warmed her heart, and she told herself patience was a virtue and soon, she would be with him again. And now she was in possession of the Danish sponges, which

would protect her.

Margaret knocked on the bedroom door and then entered. As usual, she felt no need to wait for an invitation—an informality which didn't particularly bother Penelope, since she was almost never doing anything in her bedroom she would be embarrassed for her maid to see. But as she selected Penelope's clothes, Margaret wouldn't look her mistress directly in the eyes.

"All right, Margaret, what is it you're not telling me?" Penelope asked.

"It's nothing, m'lady."

"You're a wonderful servant, but a terrible liar. Now tell me what's happening in this house to make you so fidgety."

Margaret shook her head. "It's nothing, m'lady. I 'spect you'll be dining alone tonight. Master Jamison is otherwise occupied."

The words did not at first seem terribly threatening to Penelope, since Ralph was often otherwise occupied. But then, after several seconds, a deadly chill went through her, and she shivered as she sat in front of her dressing mirror.

"Thank you, Margaret. I'll finishing dressing from here."

"But m'lady, I always—"

"Thank you, Margaret." Her voice was stern; she looked at her maid through the reflection in the mirror. "I'm not angry with you. But please, leave me alone now."

She heard her bedroom door open and close. What was Ralph up to this time? Whatever it was, it was something new, something shocking to the household staff. Had Ralph drunk himself insensate in the library? Perhaps he had urinated in his breeches, as he had done a few years earlier during the celebration for Prince Edward's ascendancy to the throne.

Feeling more embarrassed than hurt, vaguely curious of what despicable thing her husband was responsible for, she stepped out of her bedroom and into the hallway. To her left, she saw Margaret talking with two younger chambermaids. Their heads were close together, and Margaret was whispering. When they noticed her, all three walked away.

"It can't be as bad as all that," she murmured to herself.

Had she picked up the Regency fetish for gambling like so many other women of her social station, she would have put money on finding her husband within the next few minutes passed out cold from gin. He might even have soiled himself, and now the servants didn't know whether to wake him up and help him into bed, or just leave him alone.

Deciding to start with the most obvious place, she crossed the hall and stood outside of Ralph's bedroom door, listening carefully. Hearing nothing, she turned the knob and opened the door several inches, remaining quiet even though she was quite certain disturbing her dipsomaniacal husband was quite impossible.

"It just ain't gettin' hard, m'lord."

It was a female voice. Young and uneducated. It came from the direction of the fireplace on the east wall. Penelope held her breath, part of her wanting to throw the door open wide and scream, and part of her wanting to quietly close the door, walk away, and pretend it had never happened.

But she had to know—to know for sure. She inched the door open another two inches until she could see the large wing backed chair angled toward the unlit fireplace. Penelope was behind Ralph and to his left. He held a three-quarters empty bottle of gin in his left hand, and his right hand was resting atop a slowly bobbing blonde head in his lap. She couldn't see the girl's face, just her blonde hair beneath Ralph's hand.

"Just keep doing what you're doing," Ralph said, his words slurred with alcohol. "I can get it up. I just need a little inspiration from you." He chuckled malevolently. "Either you get it up for me, or I get my money back."

Penelope closed the bedroom door soundlessly, not disturbing either of the room's occupants. For a moment, she thought she would become physically ill, but then she squared her shoulders, took several deep breaths to calm herself, and walked back down the hallway toward the dining room. It didn't really bother her that Ralph had hired a prostitute. He had hired so many prostitutes in the past, and made so little effort at keeping his activities a secret, she had become inured to her

husband's sexual dalliances. But what did bother her, what hurt her deeply, was that he had brought the prostitute *into her home*. To the best of her knowledge, it was the first time he'd ever done it, and she felt particularly violated because of it.

* * * * *

"Do you want me to take you somewhere, m'lady?" Aiden asked.

Penelope shook her head. "I just wanted to ask Claxton a question. Do you know where he is?" A few feet to her left hung the hayloft rope that had been so instrumental in seducing her, and though she tried to keep her eyes away from it, she couldn't.

"I believe he's on an errand for Master Jamison."

"Did he say when he would return?"

Aiden shook his head, his long, wavy brown hair brushing his collar. He appeared to be so young and fresh and innocent, like a long-legged colt, but Claxton had intimated that the boy's previous employers had been dissolute in the extreme and had unleashed their aberrant behavior on their hapless young servant—so he couldn't be as innocent as he appeared.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" Aiden asked, leaning the hayfork against an inside wall of the stable.

Penelope looked at the hayloft rope again. Seeing it made her jittery. "I don't want to take you away from your assigned chores."

"I've finished with everything Claxton told me to do." He shrugged and grinned. "I just think it's a good idea to stay busy. Claxton doesn't like to see me lazing around."

Aiden would be a sensitive lover.

The thought was jolting, and for a moment, she closed her eyes and turned her face away.

"Did I say something wrong, m'lady?"

"No, no, of course not. I just had a thought, is all." But when she looked into his doe-like brown eyes, she saw a tenderness there she'd never seen in Ralph's eyes. "I think it's time for you to stop working for

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the day, Aiden. Don't worry about Claxton. I'll let him know you're a hard worker."

"Thank you, m'lady. I knew it was my lucky day when I got the job here. I could feel it in my bones."

Yes, you could feel it in your bones. And if I don't walk away from you this instant, I'll be wanting to feel your bones on top of me.

Chapter Five

Ralph completely disgusted Penelope by passing out the following evening at the dinner table, his head against the back of the high-backed table chair, his mouth open as he snored.

"Leave him there," she said coldly, looking at her husband though she spoke to two women from the kitchen staff. "Clean up the table, leave a couple candles lit, and do your best to not disturb him. If he asks for me, tell him I've gone to see Fiona Xenos." Fiona had made no effort to hide her contempt for Ralph Jamison, so Penelope doubted he would try to contact her there. "I should be back by midnight."

"Should I fetch one of the coachmen for you, Lady Penelope?" a kitchen maid asked, wiping her wash-reddened hands nervously on a damp apron.

"No, I'll do it myself." She started for the door, then stopped herself. She turned once more to her kitchen staff and said in a soft but assertive voice, "I would appreciate it very much if you would not talk about this to any of the staff. When you finish cleaning this room, you can both go to your rooms and consider yourself finished for the night."

Both women smiled, assured Penelope wouldn't roust them from their beds in a couple hours to provide food or drink.

Penelope's heart raced in her chest, though outwardly she did her best to appear perfectly calm. She had reached the age of thirty-six without having practiced the art of deception more than a few times, and then she was only trying to cover up the most mild of offenses. But

tonight, she hoped to deceive her kitchen staff, Margaret, and the rest of her chambermaids, and should Ralph awaken from his alcoholic slumber, him as well.

She went back to her bedroom and looked at herself in the dressing mirror. Her gown was certainly not her finest, but then she hadn't expected to see anyone other than Ralph and the servants. She thought briefly of changing into the Elizabeth Saxby gown Francesca had said she looked so striking in, then opted against it. Just to get Saxby to make a dress meant getting on a waiting list of several months, and the woman's sense of style was unmistakable. One simply *did not* put on a Saxby creation just to go see an old friend. With only Ralph to impress, she had opted for comfort instead of high fashion, and decided to go without her underbust short stay corset, so it wouldn't be an impediment to romance. A sly smile touched her lips as she thought, *I will be bouncing around a bit when I walk. I hope Claxton likes that in a woman....*

She grabbed the skirt of her gown and lifted it, looking at her legs in the reflection of the mirror. Having no wish to impress anyone, she had put on cotton stockings instead of wearing silk. And her garters, while efficiently holding up her stockings, were plain white with no effort to make them the least bit pretty.

The dress would have to stay; the stockings and garters had to be changed.

She manage to, in record time, hurry to her closet, find new silk stockings and garters with pretty red roses embroidered in them, and white kidskin slippers she'd never worn outside the house. As she slid the silk up her thighs, it seemed her hands weren't her own. It was as though another pair of hands caressed her. Her clitoris tingled, and her nipples were visibly erect through her camisole and the gown's bodice.

For a fleeting moment, she thought of masturbating to a quick climax, then decided to let Claxton do that for her. He always made her come.

A flush of heat went through her. Though it had been many years since she'd been a virgin, she had only had sex with Ralph. And though at first it hadn't really been an awful experience, she had never really looked

upon their marital bed as a place of entertainment. She had never happily anticipated the feel of Ralph climbing atop her body to thrust his skinny erection into her.

But she looked forward to sex now with every ounce of energy she possessed. Anticipated being with Claxton more than she had anything in her life.

She looked at herself one last time in the mirror, and then frowned. It was nearly a full moon outside, and the sky was cloudless. In her white dress, she would be visible the instant she stepped into the courtyard.

A dash back to her closet, and she solved the problem. She pulled a dark gray hooded cape over her shoulders, careful not to disturb her pinned-up coiffure Margaret had done such a fine job with. The cape was perfect, covering her almost to the ankles.

She held her hands out in front of herself, fingers splayed. She tried to hold them as steady as possible, but still there was a tremble to them. The right side of her mouth pulled up into a faintly sensual smile. She was nervous, but she wasn't going to let her own fear keep her locked up alone in her own bedroom.

Grabbing her small purse, she opened the bedroom door and looked out. The hallway was empty. The staff was downstairs, probably still cleaning up after the supper, making as little noise as possible so Ralph would not be disturbed. She stepped out, started out of habit to her left toward the main stairway leading to the ground floor, then spun sharply on her new slippers and headed the other way.

At the end of the hallway was a door she had only passed through a couple of times in her life. She took the servant's entrance down to the ground floor, paused there a moment in a futile attempt to slow her hammering heart, then stepped out into the pantry. The scents of fresh potatoes and tomatoes, of various spices and particularly of cinnamon, tickled her nostrils. She crossed the small room, opened the door, and stepped out into the evening breeze.

For warmth, the cape was entirely unnecessary; for camouflage, it was ideal, helping her blend in with the shadows as she followed the base of the two-story marble estate, moving slowly, crouched over. In the back

of her mind she wondered what kind of story she would tell if she should be stopped by a servant inquiring why Lady Penelope should be skulking around outside alone in the shadows. No logical, believable explanation came to mind, so she decided she would just have to remain unseen until she reached the stable.

Assuming, of course, she'd find Claxton in his stable. What if he wasn't there? What if Ralph had given him the night off and he wasn't even on the estate? Claxton hadn't earned his reputation as a womanizer by *staying home* on the nights he was off duty.

Stop thinking that way! Claxton's going to be in the stable. He'll have known somehow you were going to come to him, and he'll be ready for you. He'll want you more than ever. He'll want you 'til the sun comes up, and then he'll want you some more. He'll give you so much good loving you'll be sore for a week—maybe more.

She stepped into the stable. Not a single candle was lit, and the only illumination came from what little moonlight shone through the open hayloft hatch. She was grateful, now, that Claxton kept such an orderly stable. Like a blind woman, she stretched her hands out, searching for familiar objects, heading for the narrow breezeway connecting the stable to the living quarters for the estate's coachmen.

She stubbed her toe once, and her purse briefly caught on the edge of a railing, but she had little trouble navigating in the near-total darkness until she reached the breezeway leading to Claxton's quarters. Roofed but with open sides, the breezeway was lined with large, wooden rainwater barrels. The ones on their sides were empty, the ones on end were full. She had the luxury of washing her hair in rainwater, and the household staff always made sure she had gallons to spare.

A hand, broad-palmed and extraordinarily powerful, clamped over her mouth from behind. An arm whipped around her waist. It was a long arm—long enough to surround her, pinning both arms to her sides. Before she could make so much as a squeak, she was lifted off the ground and carried over to one of the empty barrels.

"Thought you'd sneak up on me, did you?"

Penelope closed her eyes. It was Claxton who held her, but in his

voice she heard such fury as she'd never before experienced with him. He held her very, very tightly, her body pressed against his own, her slippered feet dangling several inches above the limestone floor of the breezeway.

"I'm going to take my hand off your mouth, and you're not going to say a word. You're not going to make a sound. Agreed?"

Penelope shivered. Being held off the ground so easily made her feel small and feminine...and vulnerable.

Claxton shook her, and her feet waggled to and fro. "Do you agree, m'lady?"

She nodded. A moment later, he removed his huge palm from her mouth, and she sighed.

"You scared the—" she began, but Claxton's hand was over her mouth an instant later, pressing against her lips even more tightly than before.

"You'll either learn to follow my orders, or I'll have to start improving your memory with some punishment," he warned. The heat of his breath brushed against her ear as he spoke. "Now, are you going to be silent?"

She nodded, but this time she meant it. He took his hand from her mouth, but it hovered for several seconds just an inch from her lips. Very slowly, he lowered her until her feet were on the ground.

In a warning whisper, he said, "Remember, not a sound."

Penelope felt the strong hands on her shoulders, pushing her forward, forcing her to bend over an on-its-side rain barrel. He released the arm around her stomach, which pinned her arms to her sides. Before she fell face-first into the barrel, she was able to catch herself with her hands.

But not for long. An instant later, Claxton had taken the back of her cape and flipped it over her head, blotting out what little moonlight she could see. Then he wrenched her wrists behind her back and wrapped an inch-wide strip of leather around them. Her eyes opened wide as the full realization that he had bound her hands behind her back entered her consciousness. She was still in the initial stages of her indignation over it

when she realized Claxton had crossed her legs at the ankles and bound them, too.

"Now stay very quiet, Lady Penelope," he said.

She was more angry than frightened. She was draped over a rain barrel, her head down, her hands tied behind her, her ankles bound. Not only could she not walk, she couldn't even get up off the barrel without his help.

"You've entered my private sanctuary...once again." His voice was calm, his tone disconcertingly cold.

The cape was still over her head, so she closed her eyes, listening carefully to the anger in her servant's voice. Should she say something in her own defense or abide by her earlier agreement and not say so much as a single word?

"Keep your silence now, Lady Penelope."

Somehow, when he addressed her with her proper title, it made the title seem lewd, a little erotic, or perhaps simply misplaced.

Claxton took her by the shoulder and an elbow and lifted her off the barrel. He held her by the elbows for a moment because she was weaving a little. It wasn't easy to stay balanced when her ankles were crossed and securely tied. Once she was steady, he lifted the cape over her head and tossed it aside, and then he took several steps back to look at her appraisingly in the moonlight.

"Even more beautiful than I remembered," he whispered. "Ten thousand times your face and body has flashed in my mind since last we were together. Ten thousand times those images kept me from getting a peaceful night's sleep."

Penelope's eyes were squeezed tightly shut, her face turned down. She heard the anger in Claxton's tone.

"You have chosen an...*interesting time*—" He chuckled softly. "—to come for a visit." He chuckled again and whispered, "Now you'll see why you should never go anywhere uninvited." He chuckled mirthlessly. "It seems there are many lessons I need to give tonight."

Something coloring his words made her open her eyes and lift her chin. Then her jaw nearly dropped open because Claxton was standing

before her in the breezeway completely naked. Drawn by the magnetism of his virility, she looked down and saw his erection was three-quarters formed and already impressive in length and thickness.

He picked up her cape and purse, and then lifted her, carrying her under the knees and arms. Holding her weight, he displayed no outward effort. He looked down into her eyes, then his gaze trailed slowly over to her breasts tenuously contained by the cotton décolletage of her lightweight gown. Her struggles exposed the mounds nearly to the areolas.

"I didn't—" she began, but a look from Claxton silenced her.

Lady Penelope Jamison, bound hand and foot, was carried by a naked servant through the breezeway and into the servant's quarters. Several lit candles in mirrored holders were in the main room, off of which were the kitchen area and two bedrooms. A third bedroom was in the loft overhead.

Penelope did not at first notice the loft until she saw a rope dangling down from it. And at the end of the rope, standing with his hands bound over his head, stood Aiden. And like Claxton, he was naked, only, around his mouth, a gag had been tied.

"What? What are you doing?" Penelope exclaimed.

Claxton sat her upon a short, sturdily built three-legged milking stool and used a silk cravat as a gag to silence her protests. "That should keep you quiet and in one place," he said, looking down at her, his blue eyes fiery in the candlelight. He grinned wickedly and combed fingers over his close-cropped blond hair. "Lady Penelope, when I bound your wrists with the hayloft rope, it was an unplanned act. There were truths you needed to hear, and the rope seemed a very handy way for me to make sure you heard my words. The rest...well, the rest happened because you are unimaginably beautiful and passionate, and you had the look of a woman in desperate need of several orgasms." He smiled at her. "Clearly, I was right."

Her gaze went from Claxton to Aiden. The young man's body was so different from Claxton's, yet entirely masculine. But whereas Claxton's chest and shoulders were thick with muscles bulging prominently beneath

his skin, Aiden's muscles were more like those of a cat, his body lean, the lines graceful and fluid. His body stretched with his arms above his head and the rope taut, and she could see his ribs, the muscles in his chest and stomach, and the long, powerful muscles in his thighs. His hips were very narrow. And then, of course, there was his penis, fully erect, angling sharply upwards. Her gaze lingered on it for several seconds, unconsciously measuring its length and girth. He was nearly as long as Claxton, though his girth was not as intimidating.

Looking at Aiden's erection, she now understood why Claxton had taunted her by saying she had chosen an "interesting time to visit." Aiden was bound and gagged, and beyond question, wildly excited. Whatever had been going on *before* her arrival had obviously been stimulating to the lovely young man.

"The irony here is rich," Claxton said, his heated gaze going slowly over her. Though she tried to do otherwise, she found it impossible to look away. "I've tied you up because you entered my sanctuary without permission." He turned away from Penelope and stepped closer to Aiden, whose dark gaze never strayed from him. "And I've tied you up because you tried to leave without permission." He walked slowly around Aiden, his eyes visually caressing the slender boy, the brutish length of his erection jutting straight out from his loins now. "Aiden here thought it would be best if he went back to the count and countess. They plucked him out of the gutter, gave him the solid beginnings of an education and were in the process of destroying his soul when I found him."

Penelope bit down on the cravat gag. She was hellishly curious about the identity of the count and countess and what foul deeds they had perpetrated against Aiden. She was also, though she wasn't in the least bit pleased with this, getting increasingly aroused with this bizarre stage production Claxton directed. It was exciting to see him gloriously naked, his broad chest with a sparse patch of hair and solid muscles visible as a display of savage masculinity. And to see Aiden, his chest free of hair, his body sleek and slender and so very enticing, caressed her imagination in ways she hadn't thought possible. To see Aiden, with his hands tied above his head, added immeasurably to her arousal, just as feeling the leather

surrounding her wrists and ankles heightened all her perceptions and made her clitoris tingle with awakening desire.

"The count would have my darling Aiden in the mornings," Claxton continued. "And in the evenings, it was the countess' turn with him. Except she likes her gin. The count and countess might be Germans, but Frau Schneider has certainly developed a taste for British gin."

Count and Countess Schneider, from the Cumberland district. She had heard stories of debauchery and staggering cruelty to the servants. She'd refused to believe the rumors told of such heinous behavior, even though she'd never met either the count or countess.

Claxton turned away from Aiden, walking over to a small table where there was a pitcher and basin of water. There was also a small blue glass bottle with an ornate diamond-shaped stopper, which looked startlingly familiar. With slow deliberation, obviously aware she watched every move he made with unblinking interest, Claxton removed the stopper, and then poured a liberal amount of the thick, clear fluid into the palm of his right hand. As he walked back to Aiden, he stroked himself. His erection became even larger.

"The countess gets passionate when she drinks her gin, but when she gets drunk, she can't climax. She drinks every night. She had this lovely boy's face between her legs for hours on end. And if it wasn't his face between her legs, it was his hips. If he wasn't on his knees for the countess, he was on his knees for the count." Claxton's big fist traversed the length of his erection, the Greek ointment he'd applied making his rigid flesh glisten in the candlelight. "And since the countess doesn't like drinking alone, she made sure Aiden had his fair share and more. She foisted gin on him at morning, noon, and night. And should he ever be too besotted or too exhausted to get an erection, they took a riding crop to him. They beat him like an animal." Claxton's lips curled in contempt. "I wouldn't treat a rabid dog like that."

Penelope watched as Aiden closed his eyes. She had no doubt every word Claxton said was true. All she needed to do was look into Aiden's eyes to see the damning truth. But why would he ever consider going back to them? Was his existence here at her estate and under her

employ so hellish that returning to the count and countess was preferable? Was he running from Claxton?

Claxton moved so he stood directly behind Aiden. She watched, fascinated but frightened for Aiden, as the boy tried to look over his shoulder. Then Claxton's big hands curled around Aiden's trim hips, holding tightly. A moment later, a deep-throated groan came from Claxton. Aiden lifted up onto his tiptoes, and his doe-like brown eyes became very large. A muscle in his jaw twitched as he bit down hard on the cloth gag, his lips pulling back to reveal his teeth.

Aiden made a sound in his throat, and his body made one powerful twitch. Then he breathed very rapidly through his nostrils, and his lashes batted against his cheek. Penelope knew then that Claxton had penetrated him. She closed her eyes. The thought of taking an erection of such formidable dimensions into her taboo entrance caused a shiver of fear to ripple through her body. She would undoubtedly be torn in two if Claxton should ever do such a thing to her. But when she opened her eyes again, she saw Aiden's slender body buffeted by Claxton's charging thrusts, the boy's erection and become even more prominent.

She could only see some of Claxton as he stood behind Aiden. His face was a bit ruddy with sexual strain as he labored, his pelvis churning, his hands tight on the boy's hips. Each time he thrust inward and upward, Aiden lifted up onto his tiptoes, and his pelvis thrust forward. Beads of perspiration formed on Aiden's forehead and glistened like erotic morning dewdrops on his chest and stomach. The wet sounds of a pelvis striking taut buttocks echoed off the walls, mingling with Claxton's growls and Aiden's gasps which punctuated each impaling thrust.

*I could never let Claxton take me there. He's too big for me...but not for Aiden. It may hurt, but he likes it. It excites him to have—*she closed her eyes and turned her face away, her thoughts too coarse for her to be comfortable thinking them—*Claxton's cock in his ass!*

She heard Claxton, through clenched teeth, utter a single, "Fuck!" and she opened her eyes. His powerful arms were wound around Aiden's slender middle, and for several seconds the men were completely motionless, chest to back, pelvis to buttocks. The sound of rapid

breathing—Claxton through his mouth, and Aiden through his nose—was all she could hear. Even though the gag was still tied around Aiden's mouth, she could see the faintest hint of a smile touching his features, and there was a dreamy quality to his eyes she hadn't seen before. His erection, most notably, lost absolutely none of its rigidity.

Claxton stepped away from Aiden. He went to the washbasin and, with his back to Penelope, washed himself. Then he untied Aiden, and the boy went to the washbasin.

Standing in front of Penelope, with his half-erect penis very nearly at eye-level to her, Claxton said quietly, "Now he understands he doesn't need the count and countess. I'll take care of him. I'm in charge now. They made him think he needed their hatred. I'll teach him he doesn't need them. In time, I'll teach him he doesn't need anyone—not even me." He reached down and curled a lock of her hair around his forefinger. "It's the lesson he needed to learn. And what's the lesson you need to learn, Lady Penelope?"

Chapter Six

His strangely gentle touch evoked a flurry of memory in Penelope, conjuring images of herself with her hands tied above her head, her body buffeted against the wall of the stable as Claxton filled her completely, throwing at her what the duchess referred to as a *barbarian fuck*.

She knew it was wrong—dreadfully, terribly wrong—for her body to become so heated and moist, her skin tingling with anticipation, just because Claxton had bound her wrists and ankles. He had taken charge of her body, and her helplessness against him was an aphrodisiac to unconscious submissive fetishes she couldn't ignore.

When he stepped forward and reached around to the base of her neck, his cock was so close to her face she could smell the soap he'd used to wash himself. He removed the gag and tossed it aside.

"You're a beast," she said, though she kept her voice so quite it probably didn't even reach Aiden on the opposite side of the room. She could feel her rapid pulse in her clitoris. If Claxton started caressing her there with his tongue, she'd come in an instant.

Claxton grinned, the dimple forming in his cheek. Then he saw something, and his gaze narrowed briefly before his grin became very broad. "Well, well, well!" he said, getting down on one knee near Penelope's purse. "It would appear as though you, m'lady, are more adventurous than you've let on."

Desperately trying to ignore her own rising excitement, she said as haughtily as she could manage, "I'm sure I don't know what you're

talking about."

She saw on the floor a small, blue bottle. It had fallen out of her purse. Claxton picked up the bottle, and then went to the table to retrieve the other blue bottle. He held the two together, showing them to Penelope as though to crush any refutation she might put forward. The bottles were identical.

"Greek ointment. I know why Aiden keeps it with him." He grinned wickedly. "And there's only one reason for you to have brought it with you here."

Her eyes opened wide, and the blood drained from her face. "Wait. You don't understand. Claxton, it's not what you're thinking! I've never done *that*," she said, her words coming out in a tumbled rush. She knew, as she heard the words with her own ears, they sounded patently false. "After the last time we were...umm...together—" It was a delicate matter to decide on the right words to describe what they had done. "I knew I would be with you again. At least I knew I *wanted* to be with you again." She blushed hot. "So I went to see the duchess. She's my dear friend, and she knows absolutely everything there is to know about...relationships with men. She thought it had been so long since..."

Her words simply died away in her throat. Seated on the low stool, when she looked at her servants, she had literally to look up to them. This was especially disquieting since neither man had so much as a thread of clothing on, and one of which, though having the delicate facial features of an angel, was still sporting an erection pointed skyward.

"So you haven't been with men in a while. It makes no matter to us." He smiled and made a gesture with his hands as though to dismiss all previous facts. "I said you should be punished, and punished you shall be."

She arched her eyebrows. However erotic she found Claxton, she was a Young, a prominent family of London's ton for generations. She simply would not be *punished* by a servant.

"A spanking, I think, is in order," Claxton said in a conversational tone.

The word "spanking" caused a frisson of forbidden desire to slither

through her body. Hidden beneath the layers of dress and chemise, her nipples became more erect. At the apex of her thighs, her clitoris elongated fractionally, and slick honey lubricated the lips of her pussy. For an instant, she was afraid if she heard Claxton say "spanking" one more time in his rich, husky baritone, she would climax without even being touched.

He grabbed her by the upper arms, and as he hauled her to her feet, she watched his biceps bulge briefly, and the muscles in his chest flex beneath the thin barrier of skin and hair. Naked, his body was intimidating to look at. While Aiden's slender, athletic body was feline in form, Claxton's physique had been honed and hardened by labors far more backbreaking than anything the boy had ever known.

A moment later, as she put forward what little struggle she could, bound as she was, Claxton was sitting on the low three-legged stool, and stretched her out over his naked lap. Her face was very close to the floor on one side of his legs, and her toes touched the floor on the other.

He chuckled. "Lady Penelope, I've wanted to do this since the first moment I met you." She felt her dress and petticoat begin moving up her legs, sliding against the silk stockings she had put on just for Claxton's pleasure. "This spanking is a lesson that's been long in coming, I should think."

"A spanking? I'm Lady Penelope Young Jamison, and I—"

"Careful, m'lady," Claxton said sharply. "You can't talk your way out of this one. The lesson you're going to get is the lesson you deserve. But you keep talking like you're an innocent—when we both know you're not—and this spanking could go on a lot longer than I had planned. You think about that, m'lady. Think about that long and hard before you toss about any more of your insults."

Penelope closed her eyes, and for a moment consciously forced her thoughts to be composed and rational. She was laid out over an incredibly powerful man's lap, and her skirt was being lifted up her legs with taunting lethargy, creeping up the backs of her legs inch by inch. Her face was very close to the floor, and when she turned her head, she could see chair legs and table legs a few feet away. She could hear Aiden splashing

at the washbasin, but she couldn't see him. With her head and shoulders almost pointing straight down, her breasts threatened to tumble out over the top of her straining neckline. Nearly an inch of her right areola had been exposed above the blue lace trim; not so much of her left.

"Paradise!" Claxton said suddenly, joy ringing in his tone.

Oh, God! This isn't going to stop! Penelope thought as she simultaneously heard Claxton's declaration and felt her dress and petticoat raise above her hips. The garments were bundled together and shoved beneath her bound wrists.

"Take a look, Aiden. See these stockings? Pure silk. Only real ladies can afford pure silk."

His tone was both appreciative and yet mocking. This was an experienced man enjoying himself, but willing to take the time to teach a lesson to a man less experienced than himself. Delicate fingertips glided up the back of her left thigh, and the touch sent a tremor through her. Then a large, warm hand cupped her right buttock, squeezed, and then did the same to the left.

"Ninety-nine out of a hundred men go their whole lives without ever seeing a woman's ass as perfect as this. Take your time and look, Aiden. Memorize how she looks, because if you're not looking at Lady Penelope, then you're not looking at one of God's perfect works of art in human form."

A hundred emotions warred within her. She felt humiliated and abused—and how could she not, being bound up with strips of leather and tossed over a man's lap like a misbehaving child about to get her comeuppance? But she could also visualize herself in her evening gown, her low-cut décolletage insufficient to hold the weight of her breasts. And there was the sure knowledge that both Claxton and Aiden looked at her bottom, the cheeks of her ass thrust up high and naked, on display for their perusal and amusement.

But a little voice whispered in her head, *Wouldn't it have been ten thousand times worse if he had insulted your ass instead of singing its praises? Admit it, you would give up chocolate for the Season just to hear him say those words again!*

She squeezed her eyes shut. Yes, it was true; she would give up chocolate for the *entire* Season if only to hear those words of praise and adoration again.

"And Aiden, this beautiful ass, these beautiful, pale cheeks, need a good spanking. And that's just what they're going to get."

Her reverie cut short with those words, she arched her back, trying to see over her shoulder. Claxton pushed her down with his left hand.

"You're only going to make it worse for yourself," he said in a low tone.

But worse might be better for me, a devilish voice whispered inside her traitorous mind. *Worse might be magnificent!*

A hand grabbed her wrists and push them toward her shoulders, causing her to slide a bit on his lap. And a moment later, without time to anticipate, the stinging slap of a broad-palmed, callused workingman's hand came down *hard* on her left cheek.

"Ouch!" she gasped. "Claxton, you hurt me!"

"That's the point, m'lady."

His palm came down on her right cheek next, as hard as the first time, but perhaps not. It was the shock of the first slap, she decided, more than the sting, to which she reacted. However it was, Claxton held her securely, her buttocks up high as his right hand came down with slow precision, heating her ass more and more with each slap.

She didn't want it to be true. She didn't want to believe this humiliation, this punishment, could have elements of eroticism to it...but it did. Even though her ass stung and throbbed, she found herself anticipating the next slap. And as erotic to her senses as the actual sting of Claxton's big palm against the delicate skin of her buttocks, was the sound of him spanking her, and her own helpless whimper sounding more and more like pleasure and less and less like pain.

Each time she received a spank, she squirmed on his lap, and she became distinctly, mouthwateringly aware of the long, thick, ever-growing column of cock pressing against her stomach.

And then the spanking stopped. Without forewarning, it just stopped. She was so disoriented by a lust she did not want to experience

and certainly did not understand, that when Claxton stopped his assault on her buttocks, she almost asked him, in a complaining way, why the punishment had ended. After all, she hadn't asked him to stop, and if she was to judge by the rigidity of the erection digging into her stomach, Claxton certainly didn't want to stop. So, why?

Extraordinary lust, she was beginning to understand, could make the concepts of logic and reason merely words without meanings.

A thick fingertip touched lightly at the juncture of her labia. The digit moved up and down her length, caressing feather-light, experimentally.

"She's wet," Claxton explained. "Look how easy she lets me in."

The single finger pushed into her pussy, and the friction was so stimulating she bit her lower lip to keep from sighing. The conflicting sensations of her buttocks stinging from the spanking, and her pussy tingling from a single finger easing between passion-swollen labia, made her bones melt.

"Get the oil."

So entranced was she with Claxton working his finger in and out of her pussy, rubbing against her clitoris in just the right way, that the word *oil* almost didn't register in her brain.

Almost, but not quite.

She tossed her head up, but before she could say a word, Claxton brought his right palm down on her ass even harder than before. The sound of him spanking her echoed sharply off the walls, and she let out an honest squeal of pain.

"Struggling will only increase your punishment," he said quietly. "Before you fight back again, think about it, Penelope."

She heard the floor creaking. Bare feet against wood long since polished perfectly smooth with foot traffic. And then, as though her senses were superhumanly tuned because of the situation, she heard the glass stopper being removed from a bottle.

"Sheer perfection," Claxton said quietly, his tone distracted as though he was on the verge of a trance.

Two of his fingers were inside her pussy. And when she felt cool,

thick fluid slide between her cheeks and settle onto her puckered opening, she gasped softly, and her buns flexed.

"Relax... Relax...it'll be so much easier for you if you relax...."

Claxton's tone was soft, warm. The kind of voice a woman would instinctively trust—which made it so much different from the way he usually spoke.

She felt his thumb, then. Very, very lightly. Just moving in a circular motion on her anus with almost no pressure at all, while the first two fingers of his hand worked slowly up and down, not moving very far, slipping back and forth between the lips of her pussy.

"That's it...that's it...just relax..." His voice was a narcotic.

For the first time, she felt Claxton's left hand leave her wrists and her lower back. Slowly, he reached down, his fingertips following her arm until they slid beneath her body. Her left breast, straining against a bodice never been meant to modestly conceal a voluptuous breast while the wearer was *upside-down*, quite suddenly throbbed in anticipation of the brutish servant's caress. When the long-fingered hand squeezed her breast, she let out a low moan, then silenced herself, but not before inadvertently announcing her passion to the men in the room.

Two things happened simultaneously, and Penelope had become sufficiently schooled with Claxton's sensual abilities by this time to know the timing was no accident. The two fingers slipped out of her pussy, but as they began their reentry, his thumb pushed past her virginal resistance, the path rendered traversable by the liberal application of Greek ointment. And as Claxton's thumb made its slippery premiere entrance into her tingling ass, with his left hand he pinched the elongated nub of her left nipple exposed above the lowered neckline of her gown.

She did not cry out. Rather, the only sound she made was a sudden inhalation of breath. She inhaled...then unconsciously held her breath.

Never before, from so many different places and in so many different ways, had she experienced such panoply of sensations. The two fingers easing into her pussy and rubbing against her clitoris could, all by themselves, give her an orgasm. But there was more than just those fingers causing her body to blaze with unprecedented lust. The slick

thumb pumping in and out of her ass created a fiery sensation every bit as powerful as those caused by the fingers in her pussy. She had never thought of her anus as the source of pleasure, but even in the passion-distorted delirium Claxton had foisted upon her, she realized doors were opening this evening that would never again be closed to her.

"Oh! God...Claxton...make me come...please..."

She heard the sound of her own voice, the quiet, frantic desperation, the abject wantonness of a woman no longer in control of her own senses or desires. She heard and felt Claxton chuckle. He was in complete control of the situation. It was as though he knew exactly what he had to do, and for how long, to make her have her orgasm.

And she was getting close to her climax. Very close. Though her hands were bound behind her at the small of her back, her fingers twitched convulsively, her fists opening and closing.

The only thing she was confident of was that when Claxton finally did let her have her climax, it would be a cataclysmic one.

"Aiden, she's ready now."

Once again, Penelope heard the words, but it took a couple of seconds for them to register. She opened her eyes and lifted her head just a little. Claxton's thumb eased out of her bottom, though his fingers remained inside her pussy, stilled now as Aiden got into position.

She felt Aiden's slender, muscular legs surrounding her own, his naked thighs gliding against her own silk-clad ones. She felt his hand at the small of her back, close to her bound wrists, as he steadied himself. She felt him bend his knees, though he remained standing.

And then the crown of his erection slipped between the plump cheeks of her buttocks and pressed tightly against the lotion-slickened entrance to her anus.

There was very little time to mentally prepare herself. One second she had Claxton's thumb in her bottom, and though it had hurt the first time he entered her, she had very quickly learned to take pleasure in the thumb's undulating course. Aiden's cock, however, was much thicker than Claxton's thumb. He was rigid as steel when he pushed down into her. She flinched at the sharp stab of pain as he forced delicate tissue to

stretch farther than ever before. She clenched her teeth to keep from crying out.

The words, *He's too big!* screamed silently in her brain, followed by *Tell him to stop!*

Perhaps she would have said the words had Aiden not, at that exact, fateful moment, straightened his legs slightly, withdrawing his hard, slender cock from her throbbing embrace. A great sense of relief flowed through her when she felt the hard flesh withdrawing. But when she was completely empty, she already anticipated the next invasion. Would the second be as bad as the first? Or would it, like his thumb, cause pain and first, and then pleasure?

"Oh, God!" she cried some moments later, when Aiden slipped his bone-hard erection between her cheeks again. It still hurt to have the rigid cock slicing into her ass, but pain mingled with quite another sensation which was not displeasing. And there were Claxton's two fingers to think about as they rubbed against her clitoris with a pressure suggesting he'd done this many times before.

"Not yet, boy." He delivered the words coldly, dictatorially. "She's first; then you can have your pleasure."

Penelope knew it then. This was all for her. The pleasure. The pain. Claxton had set it all up for her. Aiden couldn't allow himself to come until she'd had her orgasm.

The awareness that she was the absolute center of this particularly sensual universe was more than she could take. She whispered, "Oh, fuck, I'm coming!" and then shivered and shuddered through the most wrenching orgasm of her life, her bound body squirming on Claxton's lap as Aiden, standing with his legs wide apart, unleashed his seed deep in her body.

Some seconds later, with her forehead now nearly touching the floor, and one breast completely free of her bodice, she blinked her eyes and whispered, "What have I just done?"

She didn't want an answer. Her whole body twitched, and the afterglow of a shockingly powerful orgasm was like a narcotic that smoothed out all the jagged nerves in her sense of propriety.

Her bottom hurt. In the throes of climactic passion, Aiden had thrust into her a bit too deeply, too aggressively, but it seemed a very minor transgression now. She already knew it wouldn't be the last time she'd feel his hard cock pumping in her ass.

"Should I help you to your feet?" Claxton asked.

Penelope shook her head, and her hair—her coiffure now destroyed—swirled around her face. "Can't...can't stand. Pull me up though."

When Claxton took her by the shoulder and moved her so she was more centered on his lap, she was once again aware of his rigid cock pressing against her stomach.

Without giving herself time for second-guesses, she bent her knees, letting herself slide against Claxton's erection, feeling it rub along her exposed breast and then tap the underside of her chin until she was on the floor at his side. Her wrists and ankles still bound, and for the most part fully clothed, her body was moist with perspiration from her intense exertions.

She looked at Claxton and said, for the first time in her life to anyone, "Come for me. I always hated it whenever—" She balked at the use of her husband's name. "—*he* made me take his thing into my mouth." She glanced at his enormous arousal, then back into his eyes. "I want to suck your cock. I've never wanted to do it before, but I want to now. I want to suck you until you come." For a moment, she closed her eyes as though stunned at hearing her own bold declaration. "Yes, yes...I want to swallow your cum." A faint smile curled her lip. "Am I the first lady to swallow your cum?" The instant the question was out of her mouth she regretted it, because what she saw in Claxton's eyes suggested she wasn't the first woman of royal blood to pleasure him to climax with her mouth. "Don't tell me," she said quickly. "I don't want to know the answer." She leaned forward, opened her mouth wide, and pushed her lips over the plump crown of his cock. He was big enough that while holding just the crest in her mouth, she couldn't push her lips much further down the shaft. When she released his arousal from her oral embrace, she looked into his eyes and said, "It doesn't matter if I'm not the first lady to suck

you off...what's really important is that I be the *last*."

She bobbed slowly, in no particular hurry to put an end to what she was doing, faintly curious as to why she should take so much delight in giving fellatio to Claxton when she had never before felt anything more than mild annoyance at having to perform the act. Having Aiden as an audience heightened her sense of self-indulgence.

Chapter Seven

Claxton's bed in the loft was the largest in the servants' living quarters, though not the closest. Though Penelope wasn't at all certain there was enough strength in her legs to climb the ladder—she'd never known such vigorous, wild-animal loving in her life—she decided it was worth the try. If she settled for Aiden's bed, which was big enough only for his lean body, they would have practically had to lay atop each other which, all things considering, might not have been much of a burden.

The bed was big enough for two and pushed against the wall. Claxton sat with his back to the headboard, his shoulder to the wall. Penelope slid in next to him, her cheek against his naked chest. Aiden got in last. Claxton's bearish arm was long enough to go over Penelope's shoulders so his big palm could rest lightly on the nape of Aiden's neck, beneath the silky fall of his chestnut hair.

They lounged for hours, talking quietly, laughing softly. It was the greatest contentment Penelope had ever experienced. Her body, naked and warm beneath a light cotton sheet, her cheek on Claxton's chest so she could hear his strong heartbeat, her left hand on his thigh, her right hand resting lightly on Aiden's hip.

"The sun's going to be up soon, m'lady," Claxton said. He took a sip of whiskey from the glass in his left hand. He turned his head just enough to plant a light kiss on the top of her head. "Much as I would love nothing more than to have you stay here, you've got to get on back to where you belong."

"I don't want to," she said, sounding young and petulant and thoroughly spoiled. For hours, she had been the absolute center of all attention, and she had no wish whatsoever to go back to her extravagant home where her life was so much different. "I want to stay here with you two."

"You can't." Claxton's tone was a bit more firm this time. "A scandal isn't what you need, m'lady. And if I let you stay here, I'd be partially responsible for the gossip." He took another sip of whiskey and shook his head. "I can't let it happen to you."

She turned her head just enough to kiss his chest, then flicked her tongue over his nipple before sucking lightly on it. He flinched and chuckled softly.

"Stop now, Lady Penelope, or I'll have to give you another spanking right and proper."

"You're supposed to threaten people with something they *don't* want to have happen."

Heated memories of the forbidden ecstasy she'd experienced at being tied up and tossed over Claxton's lap, her buttocks hot and stinging from the nasty spanking, her clitoris and anus on fire from his wickedly penetrating fingers and thumb. A shiver went through her body as she remembered just how powerful the climax had been. And later...when she took Aiden's cock into her ass for the very first time and felt his thrusting, driving...

She shuddered again and forced such thoughts from her consciousness.

"If you're very good, or maybe if you're very bad, I'll take you over my knee again." Claxton chuckled. "And *Aiden* will have you over my knee again. Do you really think you can take a Greek voyage twice in one night?"

Penelope sighed theatrically. It had hurt to take his cock in her ass, but what she had experienced was much more than just pain. The sensation of feeling Aiden, young and strong, pumping between her cheeks, was unlike anything she'd ever before experienced.

"I can be thankful he was the one who wanted to take me there and

not you." Beneath the sheet, she moved her hand from Claxton's hip until her palm rested lightly on the bulky shaft of his slumbering penis. In a tone colored slightly with apology, she whispered, "You're just so *big*." She licked his nipple again. "I'll do anything you want me to do. Even that...if it's what you really want."

This time it was Aiden's turn to chuckle. "But not too big for me. It hurt like hell the first couple of times...but then there's nothing else like it in the whole world." He kissed Penelope's naked shoulder. "There's no one else like *Claxton* in the whole world."

"Enough of this talk," Claxton growled, obviously uncomfortable with so much flattery. "Aiden, make yourself useful and go get Lady Penelope's clothes. If we don't dress her ourselves, she'll be here 'til the snow flies."

Lithe and agile, Aiden was out of bed in an instant, hurrying down the loft's ladder with the dexterity of a monkey.

"I adore the boy," Penelope said.

"So do I. It was so good of you to take him in. Those other bastards would have killed him if—"

"Let's not talk about it," Penelope said sharply. She didn't want any negative feelings marring these golden, halcyon moments. "Not now. I feel too good about everything. And besides, Aiden's here now. He's with us, he's safe, and that's what's important."

Claxton kissed the top of her head again and said, "So much wisdom in such a pretty head."

She was about to chide him for subtly accusing her of being empty-headed, but she decided to let it pass. If she got angry every time a man made an insensitive comment or degraded women in her presence, she would be in a state of perpetual fury.

Aiden was back up to the bedroom loft a moment later, apparently unmindful of his own nakedness, all of Penelope's clothes looped over his left forearm.

With a groan, Penelope rose to her feet, followed by Claxton. She was sore in a number of different places, though she wasn't going to say a word of complaint about it.

"Dress the lady," Claxton said, carrying his glass over to where the whiskey bottle rested on the widow ledge. "I'll just stand here and make sure you're doing it all right and proper."

Aiden knelt on the polished wooden floor in front of her and picked up a stocking. He looked at Claxton and asked, "Aren't you going to help?"

Claxton grinned and shook his head. "My specialty is taking clothes off, not putting them on. Besides, it's a task you should learn, I think. Lady Penelope has Margaret to dress her in the mornings and evenings, but you never know when Margaret may need to go see to an ailing aunt, or some such thing."

"How very thoughtful of you, Claxton," Penelope said, every feminine nerve in her body adoring this kind of pampering.

At Aiden's urging, she raised her knee and pointed her toe. She watched, thoroughly fascinated, as Aiden, on his knees, slowly worked the silk stocking up her leg until it stopped at her thigh. Though she had been dressed virtually every day of her life by an attendant—usually Margaret—her body tingled now because the person dressing her wasn't an old woman, he was a boy of nineteen who possessed the face of an angel and the sleek body of a powerful cat. And he was just the way Penelope liked him best—naked.

Her breath caught in her throat when Aiden tied the first garter in place around her thigh, making sure to properly positioned the bow in back. By the time he had worked the second silk stocking up her leg, her clitoris pulsed softly, and the first dewdrops of desire had formed on the lips of her pussy.

Haven't you had enough sex in the last four hours? The voice in her head was angry and maternal.

But the angry, silent voice couldn't stop Penelope from sighing softly when Aiden's slender, deft fingers tied the second garter in place. She watched as his fingers moved slowly and precisely, just inches from her tingling labia and throbbing clitoris.

Fortunately for her, he picked up her camisole next, or she quite likely would have been on her knees on the floor with Aiden. But the

camisole went over her head and came down to her hips, the process requiring only a few seconds and lacking any of the subtle sensuality putting the stockings on had prompted.

So Aiden dress her, and as he busied himself with her every comfort in mind, she watched him and Claxton, marveling at how both could feel so comfortable while being completely and gloriously naked.

Stepping into her gown wasn't a problem, though when she adjusted her breasts in the Empire-fashion décolletage, her nipples—always ready for pleasure it seemed, especially if Claxton and Aiden were nearby—instantly hardened. Claxton noticed her favorable reaction to Aiden and smiled knowingly. She was pleased with him for not making any comments, and the look she gave him said without words that she'd give him a proper thanking the next time they were together.

"I'll say good night, my lady," Claxton said with a touch of formality, as though he was properly dressed in his livery and at a lavish ball instead of completely naked and standing in a spartan loft made to house the hired help as inexpensively and efficiently as possible. "Be on your way now. And should there be anything else you need, simply ask and I shall make it so."

Penelope tried to look only at Claxton's face. She *really* tried. But he was so magnificently endowed, and even though she'd satisfied his desires three times, as he walked toward her, she noticed there was once again undeniable stiffening and lengthening of his shaft. An urge to sink to her knees and pleasure him right then and there, with Aiden watching her lewd behavior, flamed to life and became a desire almost impossible to resist.

"You *must* leave *now*," Claxton said, seemingly able to read her most intimate thoughts.

"You're right, of course. You're always right, aren't you?" She touched his cheek lightly with her fingertips. She felt the harsh stubble of his beard, grown since his previous morning's shave. The sensation seemed masculine and erotic. Everything about the man was a little rough, in one way or another. "You were right about me, and you were right about Aiden."

Claxton's grin was crooked. "Enough flattery. I'm just the bloke who tends to the horses and drives your carriage."

But he was more. A thousand times more. She kissed him on the lips, far more lightly than she would have liked, and then did the same to Aiden. She couldn't hesitate. A moment of hesitation would stop her in her tracks. Feeling a nebulous sense of desperation, knowing she had just experienced a night of passion that might never again be repeated in all its perfection, she hurried back to her palatial home. She had to force each step, knowing she was going back to her empty bedroom, back to her marriage to a man who despised her for no rational reason, back to a life holding little joy and no ecstasy.

* * * * *

"Promise me you won't do anything without asking me first." Penelope's tone was hard and cold as she stood on Cromwell Road in the early morning. Her brother, Sir Garrick Young, had given assurances that no violence would befall Ralph Jamison—but she knew her brother, and he was as protective of the family as he was rash.

"I promise I will not commit an act of violence against that foul swine you have for a husband." Garrick folded his arms over his chest. At thirty-three, he was three years younger than his sister. And as a member of one of London's wealthier families, and a member of the exclusive Society for Gentlemen of Distinction, the tentacles of his influence reached far and wide. "But Lord knows, if you'd just give me a little hint that perhaps you wouldn't mind if something untoward should happen to him, the sun wouldn't set another day on a healthy Ralph Jamison."

"Do you think there's anything you can do to protect me?" She had already told him about Gerald Jamison's plan to sue to take custody of his son's finances.

"I know the barrister. He's a nasty fellow. Top rate, he is. But I have some nasty barristers of my own."

Garrick nibbled on his lower lip for a moment, obviously thinking over possible ways to defend his sister's fortune. Penelope watched as two

women, one in her late teens the other late thirties, perhaps mother and daughter, looked at Garrick covetously as they passed him. When the elder of the two met eyes with her, the scowl Penelope received was spontaneous and venomous. She knew of her brother's reputation as a rake and a womanizer, and everyone knew whoever finally convinced him to walk down the aisle would marry into an enormously wealthy and titled family.

"Let me talk this one over with the boys at the Club," Garrick said after a lengthy silence.

"No, you mustn't!" Penelope said quickly. "I don't want anyone to know about this."

Garrick shook his head slowly and took her hand in his. "Listen to me carefully, because this is important. The Society for Gentlemen of Distinction is the most exclusive gentleman's club in England. For literally hundreds of years, the leaders of this country have been members. And do you want to know something? In all the years of its existence, not one member has ever divulged a secret, has discussed what was said in the Club, has in any way betrayed another member of the Club. The other members trust me, and I trust them." He bent low to kiss his sister on the forehead beneath her bonnet. "Go on now and let me think about your problem. Trust me, your father-in-law isn't going to get his hands on your money. I'll see to it."

"I didn't have anywhere else to go." Her voice was so soft it hardly reached Garrick's ears.

"Don't be sad. Everything is going to be all right. I only wish you had come to me with this when you first heard about it. I'm your brother. It's my job to take care of things like this."

Penelope felt a spark of confidence come to life inside her soul. If Garrick said he would protect her, then he would move the heavens and earth to do so. And if the combined strength and wealth of the Society for Gentlemen of Distinction was working on her behalf, it was the equivalent of having a small but exceptionally well-financed army searching out her enemies and dealing with them accordingly.

* * * * *

While Penelope was discussing her predicament with her brother, Ralph was wondering why his hangovers had been getting considerably worse lately. He was used to awakening with a throbbing headache; what he felt now first thing in the morning was more like a stabbing pain, as though someone held a dagger and jabbed him in the backs of his eyes. Mornings had never been pleasant experiences for Ralph, but they had become markedly worse the past couple of months.

Despite his red-rimmed eyes and the pains occasionally shooting through his brain, Ralph was in about as good a mood as he could be in prior to noon and his first drink of the day. He stepped into the stable and saw Claxton curry combing a sleek, black stallion.

"You goddamned well better be taking good care of him," Ralph said, not bothering to hide his contempt. He loathed the servant class, even though he needed them. "I won the horse in a poker game, and he's worth two thousand pounds as a racer, and even more when I put him out to stud."

"Yes, my lord." Claxton put the currycomb away and started to lead the stallion back into its stall.

"Saddle him up for me, and be quick about it."

Claxton turned back toward Ralph. "Are you sure? He's not trained. Not very well, anyway."

Ralph sneered his condescension. "Just saddle the fucking horse. Just because you can't handle him doesn't mean I can't." A smile touched his lips. Demeaning Claxton had done wonders for her headache. "I've been riding spirited animals since I was five. Who the hell do you think you are? You're nothing but a goddamned stable boy, so keep your mouth shut unless I tell you otherwise."

Ralph watched as Claxton saddled the stallion, Thunder. The horse was skittish, prancing left and right, never letting Claxton have an easy moment. And when Claxton went to put the bit between Thunder's teeth, the horse tried to bite him.

A widening smile pulled at Ralph's lips. "Thunder's got fire, that's

what he's got. Spirit. Let me on his back, and I'll harness his spirit. Goddamned horse is going to win all the races next year. Mark down this date on the calendar—on this date I turned a pain in the ass stallion into a champion!”

Ralph wasn't in any mood to have Claxton help him into the saddle. The instant all of his weight was on Thunder, the big, black beast half-bucked and tossed his head up so hard and fast it nearly struck him.

“Get me the riding crop,” Ralph growled, pointing at the whip on pegs in the wall near the currycombs.

“But m'lord, he's skittish enough as it is,” Claxton replied quickly.

There was a quality to Claxton's tone—it was almost as though he, Claxton, thought he was talking to an imbecile. Utterly infuriated, Ralph decided that when he returned, he'd take the riding crop to Claxton, just to teach him a lesson. But first, he had to teach Thunder a lesson.

“Hand me the goddamned riding crop if you value your life!”

The instant the riding crop was in his hand, Ralph turned Thunder around to face the open stable doors and put his spurs to the animal. He didn't spare the whip.

* * * * *

Claxton heard the shouting first, then the scuffle of running feet. He did not feel even the slightest moment of panic. If Ralph had fallen off Thunder, it was his own fault. And it had been an act of unprecedented stupidity and hubris to take the riding crop with him on his first ride on Thunder. One look into the horse's eyes would tell an experienced rider that striking the horse with the crop would be *the worst* possible way of trying to control the high-strung animal.

Claxton stood in the stable, putting a light, rejuvenating oil on the reins he used for the big six-passenger carriage, when a young boy came rushing in. Claxton knew the boy's face, but not his name.

“Mr. Claxton! Mr. Claxton, you've got to come quick! The black horse—he's going to kill Master Jamison!”

Claxton got up off his high three-legged wooden stool. He could

see the kid was frightened by what he'd witnessed, but he was also excited by it. Whatever had happened to Ralph hadn't exactly caused the boy to shed a river of tears.

"Where is it?" Claxton asked calmly, refusing to run.

The stable doors led out to the back entrance to Jamison Manor. Though there were nearby homes, all the backs of the homes faced this wide alleyway, where the road wasn't topped with cobblestones, and the servants' quarters were aligned in a row.

Despite Claxton's nonchalance, when he finally found Ralph and Thunder in a field some two hundred yards from the stable, his stomach lurched, and for a moment, he turned his head away in horror.

Claxton's right foot had gotten caught in the stirrup when the horse threw him. Thunder had apparently run quite a ways after Ralph had been unhorsed.

"Easy, boy...easy...nice and easy," Claxton purred as he approached Thunder.

The animal's eyes were enormous. He was on the verge of panicking, and when horses panic, they do what's in their nature—they run fast and far. The smell of blood no doubt added to the animal's anxiety.

Claxton looked at Ralph. He was either dead or unconscious, on his back with his face up, his right foot held high, still trapped in the saddle's stirrup. His arms were over his head, the riding crop's strap still around his wrist. It was unclear if his right leg had been broken. The same could not be said for his left. At the knee, his leg angled sharply to the left. His clothes and hair were wet and muddy, which informed Claxton that Thunder had run through the Sifferman's Creek. Both sides of the creek were reinforced with rocks to prevent the grassy banks from washing away. Claxton shuddered to think of what it must have been like to be dragged through those rocks by a powerful stallion running at full gallop.

Doing a quick mental calculation of the areas Ralph liked to ride, Claxton guessed the horse and rider had traveled three or four miles. How many of those miles Ralph was dragged, Claxton couldn't say with certainty. However far it was, it was enough to cause a lot of damage.

Continuing to speak in his soft, cooing tone, Claxton inched closer to Thunder. If the animal, even for an instant, had suspicions of Claxton, he would bolt again.

Claxton was almost ready to reach for Thunder's bridle when he saw for the first time the back of Ralph's head pressed into the grass beneath him. The hair was completely gone from the back of his skull, and Claxton wasn't altogether certain the skull wasn't caved in.

He's got to be dead.

But as though to refute the silent thought, Ralph uttered the lowest, softest groan.

The sound of Ralph's voice made a muscle ripple in Thunder's powerful shoulder.

"Don't worry, boy. He can't hurt you now. Just let me grab your bridle, and then I'll get his foot out of your stirrup. Don't worry, boy. I'm with you now, and I'm not going to let him whip you ever again."

* * * * *

The doctor had finished with Ralph, and after a few final words for Penelope, his face grave, he left. She thanked him repeatedly and said the rest was in God's hands.

The instant the doctor left the bedroom, Garrick hurried in. Penelope looked into his eyes then looked away. Logic and evidence confirmed Garrick hadn't done anything to Ralph to hurt him. But Penelope's heart sometimes guided her, and she knew Garrick would have loved nothing more than to pound Ralph with his fists.

"What did the doctor say?" Garrick asked, hardly glancing at the bed where Ralph lay.

"He's in a coma. He may come out of it, or he may not. We'll just have to wait and see. Apparently, the horse dragged him quite a ways—at least two miles. His right leg has been broken in two places. His left knee is broken. The back of his head has—" a shudder went through her "—suffered great damage. Neither of his arms were broken, and the doctor can't even be certain how many ribs are broken. He said, judging

by the shape and marking of the bruises on his ribs, the horse either stepped on him many times, or kicked him repeatedly." She looked at her comatose husband, inhaled deeply, then let out a long, slow sigh. "I hated him, but I never wanted to see something like this happen." Her shoulders slumped. "Now I suppose I'll have no defense at all against Ralph's father."

Garrick grabbed her by the upper arms and squeezed very firmly. "Pack some things. Be ready to leave here, with Ralph, in less than an hour. We're traveling light, so don't pack much."

"Where are we going?"

"I'll tell you later."

Chapter Eight

Amsterdam

"I love it here. It's the most peaceful place in the whole world."

Penelope wasn't exaggerating, either. She had found a lovely home in the heart of Amsterdam to rent, which wasn't far from the clinic where Ralph received his treatment. It was on the canal of Herengr, a quaint, small house with thick, high shrubbery running along the property lines down to the canal. The shrubberies provided a great deal of privacy.

It was past noon, and the sun was warm and high in the sky. As they often did at this time of day, she had put out a blanket on the grass between the canal and the house, near the one elm tree growing on the property. There wasn't really a need to pack the picnic basket, since the house was hardly more than forty feet from the blanket, but she had put in sandwiches she'd made from the delicious summer sausage from the butcher who lived only a few blocks away. There was also a large wedge of local cheese tasting much like gouda with its fine, buttery taste—though she'd received a censorious frown when she asked the proprietor if it was gouda—which she knew Aiden was particularly fond of. And there were three bottles of alcohol: a white wine for her, a red wine for Aiden, and a small bottle of whiskey for Claxton. It wasn't often they consumed alcohol so early in the day, but she wanted it to be available, just in case the mood struck them. She had discovered that, with just a glass or two of wine in her system, not only did she have far fewer

inhibitions, but her senses seemed more capable of accepting stimulation.

They sat in a triangle on the blanket to eat their sandwiches. And then, like always, they lined up front to back, facing the canal, to sip their drinks, talk quietly, and watch the world slowly drifting by. Sometimes a boat would float by, but not often. Even though they were in the heart of Amsterdam, with the shrubbery and house bracketing them, it was almost as if they were in a world of their very own. Against every convention of the day, Penelope was outside without wearing either a hat or gloves. Despite the startling unusualness of her love life, it was being outside without hat and gloves that made her feel a little wicked, a little scandalous.

Claxton sat with his back to the big elm tree. Penelope sat in front of him, leaning against the expansive surface of his chest, occasionally resting her head against his shoulder. Aiden sat in front, his slender hips framed by Penelope's thighs, his head occasionally settling back to nestle on the pillows of her breasts.

"We can't stay here forever, you know," Claxton said.

"You're always the voice of reason," she replied. Her tone of voice suggested Claxton's consistency wasn't necessarily such an admirable quality. "I got a letter from my brother just today. I'm sure everything's all right."

"What did the letter say?"

"I don't know. I haven't read it yet."

Claxton made a growling sound, prompting a short laugh from Penelope and a chuckle from Aiden.

"And you wonder why I drink whiskey in the afternoon," Claxton grumbled, but there was a smile in the corners of his eyes as he took his next sip of liquor.

Penelope laughed again. After having spent so much of her adult life in a state of anxiety, she now believed with all her heart and soul that she didn't have a thing to worry about. She had her brother—and the entire secret membership of the Society for Gentlemen of Distinction—looking out after her best interests. She had Claxton, who was constantly vigilant and with her every day, and she had Aiden, who

was gentle-hearted in the extreme, but enormously clever and possessed an ability to see the world in ways nobody else could. They all were looking out for her, and since they were, all she had to concern herself with was making sure her men—Claxton and Aiden—were content, satisfied with themselves and their lives, and happy to be with her.

"It's been almost seven weeks since we sailed out of London. Claxton's right, we can't stay here forever, even if I am the dutiful wife overseeing her injured husband's convalescence at a very exclusive clinic." She caught a lock of Aiden's slightly wavy brown hair and idly curled it around her forefinger. "You have the softest hair," she whispered, feeling the first embers of desire ignite. "I'm so jealous of you."

Aiden, leaning back with his head resting lightly against her breasts, tilted his head around until he could look into her eyes. "You, jealous of me? It's absurd, Lady Penelope. It's the whole wide world that should be jealous of me!"

He was reclining between Penelope's legs, but simultaneously with his words, he eased the skirt of her dress and petticoat over her upraised knee, and then down her thigh. She knew it wasn't an accident, and though she hadn't intended on this afternoon to be a passionate one, she certainly had no desire to trim the sails and change the direction her ship was sailing.

"Aiden, why do I suddenly feel a bit of a draft on my legs?" she asked, a smile in her voice as well as on her lips. "Perhaps its time we venture into the lovely home I've rented, and close the curtains?"

Aiden was already sitting between her legs, but when he moved, there could be no doubting he had turned with the specific intention of pushing Penelope's dress even higher up her legs. He spun slowly, and to the left, and when he was finally on his stomach on the blanket, his face was directly between her thighs. The gorgeous young man's breath caressed the already honey-lubricated lips of her pussy.

"Beautiful," he whispered.

A gasp caught in her throat. The warmth of his breath against her pussy was a physical caress made powerful by its subtlety. She had her

right knee up and her left leg flat on the blanket as Aiden turned his head and lightly dragged the tip of his pink tongue along the upper edge of her silk stocking.

“Oh, God...”

Aiden bared his teeth and lightly nipped at the delicate skin of her exposed thigh. Though everything in her upbringing screamed that she should put an end to this lunacy, when she pushed her fingers into Aiden's long, silky brown hair, she did not push him away.

She was so entranced in what Aiden did, she hardly noticed as Claxton reached around her body and under her arms to cup her heavy breasts in both hands. His strong fingers buried deeply into the lush, pliant mounds, forefingers and thumbs finding her nipples through dress and chemise to pinch and fondle.

“A...Aiden, this isn't the place for—”

The boy's tongue eased between the slick lips of her pussy, silencing her words. He rocked back and forth several times, working his tongue in and out of her, then licked upward, dragging his tongue through the juncture of her labia until he reached her clitoris. There, he flicked his tongue up and down with incredible speed, sending jagged lightning bolts of pure excitement shooting through her body.

Forcing some semblance of sanity back into her life, she curled her fingers into a fist, taking a secure hold on Aiden's hair. She leaned forward just enough to force his mouth to separate from her.

In a half-frantic whisper, Penelope said, “You c-can't...we can't...out here. God, what if a boat comes by? We're not fifty feet from the water!”

But Claxton had something else in mind, and as was always the case with him, he acted on it. His long, brawny arms slipped down on either side of her, then his enormous hands surrounded her wrists. He squeezed quite firmly, and she had no choice but to release her hold on Aiden's hair. Then, even though she put forth resistance, he had little trouble in crossing her arms over her chest and holding them there.

“Go ahead, Aiden,” Claxton said. Though his tone seemed conversational, Penelope knew him well enough to hear the burgeoning sexual tension in it. And if his tone wasn't enough to let her know he

wasn't nearly as unaffected by the show Aiden provided as he pretended, then the fact that she could feel his erection pressed against the small of her back, straining to be freed from his tight-fitting black breeches, was. "Lady Penelope needs to feel loved."

The single word *loved* echoed erotically in her ears. She watched, aching with passionate need, as Aiden rather calmly got more comfortable on his stomach, and then wrapped both arms around her thighs from the underside so his fingers were very close to her vagina. Then, using just his fingertips, he very carefully separated her labia to expose her throbbing clitoris. She uttered a short gasp when he leaned forward, but when his tongue was a fraction of an inch from her clitoris, he stopped.

Tilting his head back, he looked up into her eyes and said, "Say it. Tell me you want me to lick your pussy."

"Oh, God," she wailed. Though it was Aiden who had spoken, she could hear Claxton's influence ringing in every word. She wanted to deny the boy, to refuse to give in to his blackmail. After all, she was thirty-six and a woman in full bloom, and he was just a mere boy of nineteen. "I have no pride left," she declared, as much to herself as to her men. "Lick me, Aiden. If you don't give me your tongue this instant, I'll die. I mean it! I'll—"

The application of Aiden's skilled tongue to her clitoris put an end to her rather frantic declaration of abject carnal surrender. She watched him for several seconds as his pink tongue worked magic on her clitoris, then closed her eyes and let her head rest against Claxton's chest.

I am now thoroughly and completely a wicked woman. I'm outside in the afternoon, drinking wine, Aiden's exquisite tongue caressing my clitoris, Claxton's erection pressing against my back. I never dreamed I would ever be so...loved.

She liked the way it felt to have Claxton's hands surrounding her wrists. Though she wasn't tied up, as she had been the first time she experienced Claxton's barbaric sensuality, she felt imprisoned by him, and it added to her excitement.

It was the sound, soft and yet distinct, of waves slapping against the hull of a boat that shattered her rapidly ascending passion.

Her eyes exploded open, and she whispered frantically, "Claxton, let me go."

Aiden lifted his head, and Claxton said sharply, "Don't stop. Don't stop until the lady comes."

The bow of a boat came into view, moving downstream in the canal. The boat was moving with the current, drifting very slowly. There were dozens, if not hundreds, of small fishing boats like it in the canals of Amsterdam, though usually at this time of the afternoon they were out in deeper waters working, not in the heart of the city.

On the bow of *The Golden Moon*, a deckhand, perhaps in his late thirties, coiled an anchor rope. He was talking quietly to a young man in his very late teens or early twenties, perhaps his son. In the stern of the boat, at the wheel, was a man in his fifties. Clamped between his teeth was a small, clay pipe.

For breath-held seconds, Penelope thought they might actually float right on by without looking in her direction. It was surreal for her to feel Aiden's inexhaustible tongue working on her clitoris while what appeared to be three generations of men floated by on their fishing boat, oblivious to the wanton behavior happening less than a hundred feet away.

It was the youngest of the three who noticed first. He looked up from his instructions, saw Penelope, and nudged the man beside him. Both turned directly toward shore, and in a bizarre way, Penelope was thankful Aiden had positioned himself as he had, because—though it couldn't be more obvious what he was doing to her—the fishermen couldn't actually see her intimately, only the back of Aiden's head.

The young man called out to the captain of the boat, and by the time he turned to look at the activities occurring on shore, hot shame and even hotter exhibitionism, combined with Aiden's always-active tongue, pushing her into the abyss. While looking straight into the captain's eyes, she opened her mouth and began to shudder, her body held tightly against Claxton's chest as Aiden moaned soulfully, licking and sucking at her overheated sex throughout the orgasmic contractions.

The boat disappeared down the canal, soon hidden by the rental

property's bracketing shrubbery.

"Please stop," Penelope said in a very soft voice. "Let me catch my breath."

Aiden did as requested, but when he started to get up, Claxton growled, "You're a long way from finished, Aiden. You're not going anywhere until I say you can."

Penelope saw it then; the flash of excitement in Aiden's doe-like eyes that happened whenever Claxton gave him a sexual demand.

"You can let go of my wrists now," Penelope said quietly. "I won't fight you anymore." A satisfied smile curled her lips. "There's not enough strength left in me to fight. The boy licked it all right out of me."

She was a little surprised when Claxton refused to release her wrists, continuing to hold them tightly, just as he kept her arms crossed over her chest. He lifted her and moved her to the side, so she sat on the blanket with him, angled sharply to the side. Her head and shoulders were now almost in his lap.

"Take it out, Aiden. Take it out and show me how she's not the only one you like to please."

Penelope was on her side, her skirt still pushed up high enough to show anyone in passing boats her small, triangular mound of auburn pubic hair. Claxton's grip on her was as secure as steel. She watched as, just inches away, Aiden's slender fingers worked swiftly on the two vertical rows of buttons holding the front placket of Claxton's breeches closed. The instant Aiden released the buttons, Claxton's erection, long and thick and already beautiful formed, sprang away from his body.

After taking a faltering breath, Penelope whispered, "I'm always a little shocked whenever I see you."

She watched, hardly breathing, as Aiden's slender fingers curled around the shaft of Claxton's cock. As his fingers tightened, Penelope heard and felt Claxton's low, throaty groan of sensual pleasure.

* * * * *

Hardly had Penelope finished bathing after having spent a good

portion of the afternoon making love with Aiden and Claxton—*outside!*—while simultaneously entertaining some of the ancient city's fishing fleet, when there was a knock at the front door. She checked her appearance in the mirror—did her previous sexual exertions still show? One couldn't be too careful, after all—she answered the door.

She received a message by special carrier from the clinic's proprietor. He needed to speak with her immediately, and he had sent a carriage to take her to him.

After giving Claxton and Aiden only the briefest of explanations before her departure, she stepped into the carriage and went to the clinic for the second time that day, but this time there was a feeling of foreboding she couldn't shake. If Ralph had passed away, her money would go to Ralph's next male heir. The injustice of it, the sadistic almost misogyny of it, made hot tears of shame and fury pool in her eyes, but she did not shed them. If it was true, if the vile Gerald Jamison really would take possession of her fortune, then it would be time for tears. But until defeat was assured, she would not cry. She was a fighter and would go right on fighting until there was nothing left to fight for.

When Penelope reached the Clinique de mere Mary, the director, Honore du Parone, was standing at the front steps to greet her, a grave though noticeably professional expression on his face. Penelope knew right away that her husband had died. On the day they'd first brought Ralph to the Clinic of Mother Mary, Monsieur du Parone had worn the exact same expression as a corpse was carried out beneath a sheet on a stretch. Whether it was genuine sympathy or simply the response to losing a paying patient, she wasn't certain. Considering the amount of death the man had seen, real grief seemed unlikely.

"May I see you in my office?" the director asked, his tone hushed, his English accented. Though he ran one of the finest medical facilities in Europe, it was common knowledge that he'd fled revolutionary France while a mob of peasants had searched for him, determined to put him to the guillotine.

Penelope thought it strange, when Monsieur du Parone explained how her husband had passed away shortly after noon, that she didn't feel

the slightest bit of grief or any sense of relief. More than anything else, she was aware of her life with Ralph simply being...over.

"I assure you, we did everything we could for your husband. Everything," Monsieur du Parone said as he took his chair behind a desk laden with paperwork. "And in the end, he died peacefully in his sleep."

He died because he took a riding crop to a big, spirited stallion who dragged him through the countryside and then kicked the hell out of him. There was nothing peaceful about it. And if ever there was a man who deserved the death he got, it was Ralph, she thought.

"It's a comfort to me," she said neutrally.

The director took out a small sheaf of papers, gave Penelope one more look of bereavement, and said, "I realize this is short notice, but this is generally the time when the next of kin like to settle up their accounts so the funeral arrangements can commence."

Penelope didn't just look into the director's eyes, she tried to look into *him*, to see what was behind the professional mask of quiet concern he showed the world. There was more to the man than just being the director of a rather famous clinic. If there wasn't something under the man's fingernails, he wouldn't have had to leave Paris with nothing more than the shirt on his back.

"Monsieur du Parone, how many people know my husband has passed away?"

The man's eyebrows narrowed. "Several of the nurses, I suppose."

"And who have they informed?"

"Just me. Naturally."

"Yes, naturally." She leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs at the knee. She felt a slight twinge at the apex of her thighs. It hadn't been two hours since she had been the central figure in a rather vigorous *ménage à trois*, and she was a little sore—though she wouldn't have changed a thing about her afternoon. With effort, she turned her concentration back on more pressing matters. "And naturally, you'd like me to pay you for the care you've provided my husband."

His cheeks colored just a little. He didn't know what was coming next. That didn't displease Penelope.

"Yes, naturally. Though we pride ourselves in helping people, if we do not get paid, we cannot keep our doors open for patients like your husband."

Penelope cocked her eyebrows. "If my husband dies, you'll have to stop billing me."

"Lady Jamison, your husband *has* died." Then his expression changed, and he leaned back in his chair, looking at her with a certain suspicion. "We're alone in this office. Whatever you have to say to me will remain our secret."

Penelope didn't trust Monsieur du Parone, but trust wasn't important. What *was* important was greed—and she was certain he had plenty of it.

"It's very simple," she began, creating the plan as she spoke. "If my husband is dead, then you stop receiving the weekly payment from my bank in London. However, if he remains alive, then you will continue receiving those payments, won't you? And if the money goes directly into your personal account, who is to know, and who is to care? No one but me, and I won't mind." Penelope smiled. "Think of how profitable it would be if you would see there's always sufficient paperwork to prove my husband is alive." She smiled. "Alive, and actually getting better, thanks to your skilled treatments."

Monsieur du Parone leaned forward in his chair, placing his hands on his desk. "I can see why it would be profitable for me, but why would you want to continue to pay me even after I am no longer helping your husband?"

"That is my concern, not yours. Please see the paperwork concerning my husband's treatment stays current." She rose to her feet, and though barely over five feet tall, she suddenly felt like a giant. "If anyone comes looking for my husband, you'll say he has been sent to another clinic to see a special doctor. Do you know of such a clinic? One very far from here?"

"My brother has a clinic in Munich."

"Perfect. If necessary, my husband has gone to Munich." Penelope turned and walked to the door. She paused and looked over her shoulder.

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"The payment will come as usual. The paperwork must be beyond reproach. Do this right, and you could be making money for my husband's treatment for years."

Chapter Nine

London

When he watched Lady Penelope Young Jamison walk into the judge's chambers, Gerald Jamison's did not smile, though the urge was almost overpowering. She had come to the meeting with Judge Ian Wharton with only her brother Garrick in attendance. Could the woman be naive enough to think she didn't need legal counsel? It was almost too good to be true. James Watkins, his barrister, would rip Penelope and her brother to shreds!

"Thank you for coming on time," Judge Wharton said, not bothering to rise from the enormous leather chair.

The judge adjusted his wig, then the folds of his robe. He did not look up, nor did he show even the slightest bit of respect to either Penelope or Garrick. A surge of confidence went through Gerald. The money he'd put into the judge's coffers seemed to have been well spent.

When Penelope and Garrick were seated facing the judge's desk, he looked at them sharply beneath shaggy white eyebrows.

"You've come on time. Good," the judge said, though the tone of his voice didn't make it particularly clear he thought anything was *good*. "As you are aware, your father-in-law has presented to me papers of a very serious nature. It is my intention here today to find out if there's any merit in going forward with proceedings."

James Watkins said, "Your Honor—"

The judge's upraised hand immediately silenced him. "I'll do the talking here."

The look he gave James was glacial, but Gerald didn't mind. He saw through the theatrics. Judge Wharton was just making it look good, giving the impression the facts of the case mattered. Gerald decided another case of Champagne sent to James' residence was in order.

"Lady Jamison, your father-in-law has claimed that due to your heartlessness and negligence, your husband has been rendered incapable of overseeing his own affairs."

"But, Your Honor—"

"Silence!" Judge Wharton's eyes were flinty as he looked at Penelope. He didn't look at Garrick at all. "When it is time for you to speak, you may. Until then, Lady Penelope, it is in your best interests to follow the instructions of this court and remain silent." He cleared his throat, giving the impression that controlling his temper was a difficult task. "Gerald Jamison has requested he take, in effect, regent control of his son's affairs until such time as his son regains full control of his mental faculties. Do you understand what I'm telling you, Lady Penelope?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"And can you see any reason, given the seriousness of these charges, why they shouldn't be brought forth before a full court for a complete airing of the facts as we know them?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"And what are those reasons?"

Gerald pursed his lips tightly together to keep from smiling. The moment of truth was at hand. He didn't have a flicker of doubt his plan to control Ralph's money was about to come to fruition.

"As you are aware, my husband had a very serious riding accident," Penelope began.

"After the accident, she took Ralph out of the country without telling a soul," James said quickly.

Judge Wharton cast James a glance but said nothing.

"Yes, I took my husband out of the country quickly, but only so he could get the best treatment—the treatment he needs—as soon as possible.

You can hardly accuse me of wrongdoing when I've been doing everything I possibly could to see my Ralph recovers, even if it meant taking him to the Continent."

Gerald smiled malevolently. "And now you're going to tell me he's getting better at this famous clinic?"

When Penelope refused to look at him, Gerald felt a rush of excitement. He saw the slight blush come to her cheeks, and that was a good sign, too. The fact her brother visually threw daggers into him was another indication he would soon be in control of Penelope's finances.

"He's getting much better, Your Honor. He has his good days and his bad days, of course, but he is showing great improvement." Penelope's smile held the hint of embarrassment. "He's *very* much improved."

"*How* much improved?" Gerald asked, having read the London doctor's report of Ralph's injuries. The report had made the injuries and Ralph's condition seem dire.

Penelope turned at last and looked straight into Gerald's eyes. "So much improved that I'm going to make you a grandfather." She smoothed a hand over the slight swelling of her stomach. "Ralph and I are going to have our first child. Aren't you happy for us?"

Gerald felt the blood drain from his face. It was the worst of all possible news, the one variable he hadn't counted on.

Judge Wharton cleared his throat, and when all eyes were upon him, said quietly, "Well, then, Lady Penelope, I guess that does put this matter into a whole new light. Umm...you're obviously doing your matronly duty to your husband. This matter ends here. The full court will *not* be hearing Mr. Jamison's charges."

Penelope turned to her father-in-law and said, "If I have a son, then Ralph will have his heir, won't he?"

The End

Author Bio

Robin Gideon is the author of a dozen historical romances in paperback, and numerous e-novels and e-novellas. Her historical romance, *Cheyenne Desire*, was named 3rd Best All-time for Sexy Romances by Amazon.com's ListMania. She was the featured author/artist in February 2006 on the nationally syndicated TV show CBS Sunday Morning. She will have new releases out every month in 2009. *Gentlemen of Distinction: Penelope's Awakening* for Cobblestone is just the beginning of the series set in Regency England. Visit her Web site at www.robingideon.com. And take the questionnaire! She loves to know what her readers are looking for.