



TANGLED WEB

ALEXI Z. SANCHEZ

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THE VICTORIAN CHRONICLES

BY

ALEXI Z. SANCHEZ

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Tangled Web

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To Tina Haveman. For believing in my trio...

*A wise man lies when his life hangs in the balance,
but only a fool lies to himself—*

Clifford Iverson,

13th Viscount Rathbern

CHAPTER ONE

The Cotswolds, Cirencester, England
May 18, 1851

Clifford Marcus Iverson, Viscount Rathbern, slammed the door shut to his cozy sitting room with a resounding bang, and for one brief moment, silently prayed for deliverance. Or forbearance.

For a few moments, he stood facing a row of large windows, simply staring out at the scene that symbolized much of the serene beauty of this part of the country. He heaved a fed-up sigh and flopped into his favorite brocade upholstered chair by the fireplace. It matched his mood perfectly today – a dark gray stone. Not more than five seconds ago, his housekeeper apologetically informed him the butler he hired only three days prior, a man who repeatedly assured him of his robust good health and dependability, supposedly lay near death's doorstep. The man was in his assigned quarters at this very moment racked with

the chills—for who knew how long.

Christ, he was tired. Tired, that is, of his scheming Mama, love her dearly though he did, and her entire lot of meddling, bluestocking friends. At thirty-nine years of age and now, an only child, he knew full well what he wanted out of life *and* in it, *and* it wasn't that mousy spinster, Tiffany Sandleton, who he'd run into for three teeth-grinding days this week alone, *nor* her simpering, see-through parents. That old maid daughter of theirs wasn't a day under thirty-two! She was an unmarried old maid for good reason.

Albeit, he desperately needed an extra, sizeable flow of income to finance his beloved research projects, including a somewhat avant-garde business venture he, the Duke of Wenfield, and an engineer by the name of Henry Bessemer schemed up together. It involved the creation of a steel converter, which would hopefully one day enable the mass production of steel.

Desperate he might be, but he wouldn't sink low enough to marry that woman. He didn't need it that badly! Not yet at any rate, and he hoped never to be. For ages now, all three of the wretched Sandletons continued in their efforts to dog his every step with a persistence that simply amazed. What with his mother and *them*, he wasn't given a moment's peace since having the unlucky foresight to step his two large feet into

London's social scene this year. In the city or the country, eager mamas seemed determined to foist their daughters on him.

Wretched lot! He didn't want to marry any of them. A brief tryst, maybe, but *marriage*? He shuddered at the loss of his freedom to do exactly as he pleased whenever it pleased him.

A loud knock and muffled voices outside the ornately carved door of his sitting room interrupted his one-track reverie. A second later a tall well-built man, thirty-six years of age and impeccably dressed in expensive attire, strolled through the door unannounced. He wore a friendly, congenial smile on his face.

"Good grief, Weatherson. No need to introduce me, man, Clifford knows me well enough." He lifted an eyebrow and looked at his close friend of two years, and then at Clifford's crusty, young valet.

For one still so young, the attractive valet didn't seem to have a light-hearted bone in his lean, trustworthy body, and he probably never would, the Viscount thought in some amusement. "That will be all, Weatherson. You may go," said the Viscount dryly, with a brief smile.

As soon as the door closed, Clifford, his eyes a piercing blue, looked up expectantly at Alexandre. "As you probably gathered, Weatherson is filling in for the new butler who's out sick. What brings

you here so early in the day, Alex? It can't be more than ten o'clock in the morning and you rarely rise before that, let alone are up, dressed and about the town. It amazes me that you can accomplish so much despite your seeming indolence," he commented and looked pointedly at his watch. "Nothing dire, I hope?" Curious, he looked back up and flashed his friend a warm, welcoming smile.

"Don't play with me; *I'm not in the mood*. You know why I'm here, Clifford." Wainhaven's deep baritone slashed through the air like a razor-sharp whip.

"No. I'm afraid I don't," Clifford replied cautiously, not liking his friend's tone of voice in the least. Wainhaven's joviality of seconds ago when Weatherson stood inside the room, inexplicably vanished as though it never existed.

"Get up."

"What?" Clifford gave him an incredulous look.

"You heard me. I said, get up."

"*Make. Me.*"

Alexandre Luc DuPraden, second Earl of Wainhaven's arms whipped out and snatched the Viscount up by his powerful shoulders. No fear showed in the younger man's eyes as he lifted the Viscount forcefully from his chair, a man he knew outweighed him by almost forty pounds of pure muscle. "Go to hell, Clifford."

"Take your hands off me." Irritation streaked across the older man's voice. "What has gotten into you, Alexandre?"

"This!"

Alexandre's arms snaked around Clifford, effectively preventing the other man's movement. Alexandre stood so close he could see the dilation of Clifford's pupils. Then he leaned up and closed his plump, moist lips on Clifford's in a butterfly kiss.

* * * *

"What the hell are you doing?" Clifford felt the agitation in his breathing and his heart speed up in shock. This couldn't be happening. When he spoke, his voice came out low and harsh. "I'm not *that way*. I've given you no indication to the contrary." His body tensed, primed to fight, even as he mentally sought an innocuous way out of his predicament. "I'm not into men, and I *said* take your hands off me, Alex. I can promise you, you'll be sorry if you do not."

"I'm not afraid of you, Cliff. I will never be afraid of you. Remember that. Try kissing me back. Just once. That's all I ask."

"Have you lost your hearing as well as your senses? I said—"

The sound of Alexandre's sudden chuckle

surprised him and all he could do was stare at the unearthly, perfect features of the man whose arms clamped around him so tightly he could barely do more than breathe. He had the damn nerve to laugh? The whole thing was fast becoming surreal. He could have him unconscious in an instant with one well-aimed strike or kick, but he did not want to hurt him. He truly didn't...his best friend of all the many people he knew. He did not want to hurt him.

"Instead of those feckless women you always run around with, who never completely satisfy you anyway, why don't you try me on for size? Hmmm? We have everything in common, and I want you." His arms still locked around him, he moved his hands in a firm caress up and down Clifford's back, touching his trigger points at just the right pressure. "Every man bores me to tears...every man...except you. I'm tired of waiting for you to come around and see things my way. I've waited one year too many, and I'm tired of it."

"You have truly lost your mind."

"I'm very sane, Viscount. Saner than you at the moment."

With Clifford's mouth wide open for the next seething retort, Alexandre zoomed in on his parted lips with a speed that startled. Clifford never saw his tongue coming.

Like a giant bird of prey, Alexandre hands tightened around him and his mouth swooped down for the attack. Clifford felt the Earl's tongue gently explore his own, licking the inner crevices of his mouth in what could only be termed as *exquisite talent*. Over and over, Alexandre worked his mouth over his own, trying to coax a response from him – waiting patiently while all the time, his best friend's hands, lips, the grind of his bulge against his clothed body, continued on in perpetual assault. *May all that's merciful help me in this life and the next*, he thought, as he finally let out a groan of pleasure despite himself.

* * * *

Alexandre flexed his tongue inside Clifford's mouth and moaned too. He eased his supple body to his knees, sparing only a quick glance at Clifford's shocked face, unfastened dark brown trousers and underwear and quickly slid both down to the older man's knees before he got the idea to stop him. Wasting not a second's worth of time, he plopped Clifford's bulbous head into his mouth. And sucked. And sucked some more. "You're beautiful down here, thought I'd tell you," he murmured softly, as he flattened his tongue and swiped it down the entire length of Clifford's shaft...down, down, to his balls. Then

he put those jewels in his mouth and sucked those too.

"Does it feel good? How insane am I now, Cliff?"

"Don't patronize me. You know it feels good...you've certainly had enough practice to be good at it," he said in sarcasm. Embarrassment and shame hit him in the gut at the same time arousal, sharp and hungry, slammed into his cock. Then he forgot nearly everything as Alexandre's skillful hands and mouth really began to work his thick flesh.

"Do you want me to stop?"

"I don't care if you do, dammit," he snapped angrily. "Take this!" he said in the same angry tone, and deliberately rammed what he knew was a considerable amount of cock deep inside Alexandre's mouth. Wanting to gag him, wanting him to stop, maybe wanting him...not to.

Alexandre's eyes shot up to his, startled by the violent action. Then he closed his silver-grey eyes and seemed to smile.

Again, Clifford plunged in anger. And again, Alexandre took it, suctioning him on every down stroke. It made Clifford nearly lose his breath. In fact, before long, he wondered if he could breathe at all. Soon they fell into a thrust-take rhythm with Clifford thrusting, soft-gentle, long-hard, as his friend took it down his endless throat.

"Take your hand and guide it in and out of my mouth," Alexandre said urgently, as he ripped open his own trousers and began fisting his leaking flesh with both hands. "I need to come too."

He watched as Alexandre climaxed with his mouth solidly fastened around his own thrusting flesh.

It was an erotic sight, Clifford thought from far away, as though he were outside himself. He could feel his hands massaging himself and Alexandre's sinfully busy lips. Could feel his release approach, yet couldn't believe it.

Stunned by it all, staggered by everything, he gave only one brief, muffled sound of warning before he spent himself inside his lover's mouth...

* * * *

His breathing far from steady, Clifford, in the process of righting his shirt and re-buckling his pants, heard another loud knock land on the door. Damn. It sounded like *two* people were knocking this time. "Christ," he muttered in agitation, giving Alexandre and himself a quick once-over.

"Who is it?" he managed to call out in a composed manner. After that little display of Alexandre's, he didn't wish to be disturbed for the next twenty-four hours. He swore he'd been

sucked to within the last breath of his life. In fact, thought he held his last breath more than once. Still reeled from the sensations Alex wrought with his hands and mouth. Still in shock it happened at all...allowed it to happen without hurting or nearly murdering the man for his gall. What would happen if his valet didn't choose that moment to knock on his door—another round of oral pleasure by Alex minutes from now? An hour? Less? Something more debauched?

* * * *

The butler opened the door and behind him stood none other than Tiffany Sandleton in the flesh. Clifford forced a smile as he looked at the woman he'd made a career out of dodging. Tall, exceedingly slender, with small breasts and a narrow waist that flared only slightly at her hips, she was definitely not given much in the way of curves. Always style-conscious, she wore a long-sleeved Redingote gown cut in the latest fashion in a deep violet, trimmed with white and gold. A matching bonnet sat jauntily on top of her head. Although her wide light-brown eyes were heavily lashed and quite lovely, she was not considered an attractive woman. Her nose was too big and her jaw too square. Her straight hair, obviously quite long, was thin and an unassuming mousy brown.

And while she possessed a sensuous cupid-bow mouth, the effect was spoiled by the perpetual frown of displeasure she wore.

Standing beside Clifford, The Earl of Wainhaven visibly stiffened and let out a soft expletive when he saw who stood on the threshold.

Clifford looked at the thin, unattractive woman and was barely able to stifle a curse himself.

Without waiting to be announced, Tiffany brushed past the Viscount's valet and marched right up to Clifford. "Good morning, Lord Rathbern."

"How can I help you, *today?*" Clifford replied evenly enough. The subtle perfumed scent of violets assailed his nostrils and he sneezed. Again, he forced a courteous smile. "Sorry."

Tiffany turned her head pointedly, first in Alexandre's and then in the valet's direction. "I wish to speak with you for a moment. Alone, please."

"No," Alexandre responded softly before Clifford could get a word out. "I seriously doubt there is much of value you have to say."

Her beautiful brown eyes, her one and only true claim to beauty, snapped on Alexandre's steely grey ones. "Sir, I believe I was not talking to you. Something I am never wont to do, I assure you. Our paths seldom cross, something for

which—I want you to know—I am heartily glad.” She gave an exaggerated show of shuddering in distaste, aimed directly at him. “Surely, the Viscount can speak for himself. Or do you, Lord Wainhaven, have him tongue-tied?”

“Watch your mouth, Ms. Sandleton,” Alexandre replied in a voice cold enough to freeze the North Pole.

“Watch it or what, Lord Wainhaven? Hmmm? Or what?”

“Please. The both of you stop it. You’re causing my head to hurt.” Clifford looked over Ms. Sandleton’s shoulders at his valet who still stood there avidly listening to the exchange while awaiting further instructions. “You may leave us, Weatherson,” he informed his valet politely, “thank you.”

Tiffany smiled in triumph at that small leeway.

She took another daring step, stepping so close to the dazzling raven-haired gentleman they almost touched.

“No doubt your ‘head’ does hurt about now. Doesn’t it? What with Alex in your presence for any length of time, how could your head not positively *ache*?” She gave the Viscount a long, curious perusal, then something in her shrewd, intelligent eyes changed and she stared once more at Alexandre, who promptly growled at her low in his throat. She ignored him. “As I stated, Lord

Rathbern, I wish to speak to you. Alone."

"You know where the door is, Ms. Sandleton," Alexandre threatened, again, before Clifford could speak, "I suggest you use it." Alexandre's look clearly insinuated he saw no point in uttering niceties.

"May I remind you that this is not your home, sir?" she countered coolly, undaunted. "Whatever your feelings about me...the dislike and all the rest...let me reassure you, the sentiments are mutual. I will take my leave if Lord Rathbern asks it of me, not you. I might inquire by the way, what you are doing here so early yourself, Lord Wainhaven?"

Clifford's glance snapped from Alexandre's distinguished, unsmiling countenance to Ms. Sandleton's look of challenge.

Did she know what just transpired between him and Alex? He hoped to the heavens above that she did not. The scandal would ruin him and kill his mother.

"Lord Rathbern," Tiffany glanced back at Clifford, "I ask for but a few moments of your valuable time."

A deep sigh escaped him as he ran a hand through his thick, wavy hair. He still reeled in shock from what happened minutes ago between him and the man he thought of as nothing more than a very good, *platonic* friend. It took him

totally by surprise. He'd never felt anything so scrumptiously pleasurable in my life, at least up to this point, he concluded silently. *Have I been in denial all this time? Or is this just a one-time fluke never to happen again?*

"Please leave us, Alexandre. I will see you later at your house – if I may?"

"You know you may." Alexandre shot a lightening quick look of aggression and pure promise all rolled into one at Clifford. He tipped his hat to Tiffany in a parody of a bow, his dislike of the situation almost palpable, then nodded to Clifford and let himself out.

"Well, out with it, Ms. Sandleton. What do you want?"

Tiffany gave Rathbern a look of guileless innocence, and suddenly sniffed the air in a delicate manner. She pasted a demure smile on her face. "My, my, Lord Rathbern, your cologne is obscenely heady today. What do you call it?"

"I'm not wearing cologne."

She sniffed once more. "I'd call it, let me see...*the doings of you and Lord Wainhaven*...wouldn't you?"

Oh, no, dear God, The chit is getting ready to blackmail me, he fumed. He most certainly could smell that! He took a deliberate step back from her. "What's your point exactly, Ms. Sandleton?"

"Your offer of marriage," she replied in her

usual blunt manner, "is the point, as is the consummation of our vows, which is to result in a daughter and son born of the marriage—especially a daughter. I desire an heiress, not necessarily an heir, Lord Rathbern."

"What! The devil you say!" As if they possessed a mind of their own, his hands balled into tight fists of hard fury wanting to strike out. Slowly he relaxed them and slid them into his pockets where he promptly curled them up again. "To be quite honest, I don't particularly care what your desires are."

"In exchange," she continued on, as if she hadn't heard his outburst or seen his clenched hands, "I will keep my mouth shut about the long-term sexual liaisons of you and that odious scoundrel, the Earl of Wainhaven—"

"There has been no long-term sexual liaison between him and me," he cut in.

"Viscount Rathbern." She heaved a protracted sigh of patience, an expression of disbelief on her plain features. "Come now. Of course I don't believe that," she said, disregarding his curt denial. "Also," she went on, "I will share with you my family's considerable fortune and all of my own to fund your research or whatever you desire, so long as it's not being squandered in the gaming halls."

"You've got to be out of your mind, woman."

He gave her such an incredulous, distasteful look it was almost comical. "You're the last woman I'd ask to marry me."

"I can very well see that now, My Lord, given your propensity for abnormal *masculine* company and secret life of debauchery. I'd no idea until today. Nowww then, do we have an agreement?" Her voice was quite amazingly chipper under the extraordinary circumstances.

Never in his life had he wanted to kill a woman until now. "No, we do not have an agreement!" he snapped.

"Fine. I am well aware of your financial strain, Lord Rathbern. I assure you, I can make that strain go far, far away. I ask you to reconsider my generous offer." She waited for the explosion to come and showed no surprise when it did.

"The only thing I want far, far away from me is YOU! You're nothing more than a cheap blackmailer who wants to get her hands—you and those wretched parents of yours—on my title and the entrance to polite society."

"That's partially true," she replied airily. "But it's not the whole truth."

"Get out. Get out now before I strangle the last breath in your puny body, Ms. Sandleton."

Tiffany's suave business-like demeanor crumpled like a deck of cards and undisguised anger spilled forth in its wake. "Fine, Lord

Rathbern, I won't take up any more of your time. I suggest you and your *lover* take a look in the next edition of the *Ladies Gazette* two days hence. And by the end of the week, try reading *The London Times*. There's sure to be some very interesting tidbits in there about both your sex lives!"

"Alexandre is well-reputed for his integrity and remarkable acumen, and gives little care to what others outside his circle think of him—including you." His blue eyes gleamed at her with murderous intent. "His debauched sex life is hardly a huge secret."

"No. But yours is. By the way, I wouldn't consider foul play if I were you. Should something happen to me; both you and Lord Wainhaven will be immediately implicated. Good day, my Lord."

Clifford stared at her. *The Times* was London's—and the country's—most famous newspaper. She had him over and under a barrel, and he knew it. He *did* care about his reputation, and she apparently knew that. The scandal she would cause didn't bear thinking about. He'd never been with a man before today in a sexual way, but the gossip columns wouldn't be interested in stating that honest fact. They'd paint him as though he were some hidden, dissolute bisexual—a lover of both women and men—since the moment he hit puberty.

The tangled mess of it all was he enjoyed every

last thing the breathtaking golden-locked Alexandre did to him. *Enjoyed it immensely.* Wanted to keep on enjoying it too, but in secret. Even now he could feel his temperature rise and the unruly member between his legs rise right along with it. His ability to spring back into an exceedingly aroused state so soon amazed him. It obviously didn't seem to matter that he'd just spent himself inside one of the fullest set of lips he ever seen on a man. His cock hardened another notch.

Tiffany turned toward the exit, her wobbly legs straining to hold her up as she took first one step and then another.

A deep, masculine voice called out from behind her.

"When do I sign the marriage papers, Ms. Sandleton?"

"So we have an agreement?" she confirmed to the door, not daring to turn around to glance at him.

"Yes," he gritted out, "I believe we do."

Clifford stood rooted to the spot after she left.

Every muscle in his six-foot-three-plus body coiled in tension, his face a dark mask of total shock. It was the price of one indiscretion at the wrong time, he lamented, scowling. Had it been anyone else, anyone else at all, waltzing through his door at ten o'clock in the morning, he'd still be

looking at bachelorhood.

Snarling an oath, he took the crystal decanter sitting on the table next to him and hurled it and its contents at the wall. Glass and liquid struck the brick of the fireplace nearby and splattered across the gleaming hardwood floor.

* * * *

Once outside the Viscount's home, Tiffany closed her eyes tight. She was a stone's throw away from the man she'd been besotted with from the first moment she laid eyes on him years ago. A man she'd nearly found behaving in a shocking manner with another man.

A man she willingly braved the elements and her self-doubts to see...and she didn't regret it.

If she couldn't have him by hook, then by heaven, she'd have him by crook.

I did it!

Tiffany let out a shaky, triumphant breath. Helplessly infatuated, she thought the Viscount one of the most handsome men she ever encountered. She couldn't wait to tangle her fingers through his mass of jet-black waves, kiss the delectable cleft in his chin, stroke the hint of grey at his temples, which made him look even more classy and debonair in her eyes. And on top of it all—he was titled.

Noble blood ran in his family for countless generations. Seven hundred years of nobility, in fact, ran in his blue blood. In addition, the land her family recently acquired, all five thousand acres of it, abutted his fifteen and a half thousand-acre property. Touching her flushed cheeks, the entire encounter flashed through her mind. In all honesty, she'd been secretly devastated when she marched up so close to Lord Rathbern only to see him and Alexandre standing next to one another, surreptitiously struggling for breath. A shrewd and extremely observant woman, she quickly concluded Clifford played no innocent game of chess with the horrid Earl of Wainhaven before she entered his cozy sitting room.

Tiffany sank against the rain-splattered wall, a bundle of nerves on this unusually chilly day in May. The damp wind blew her lightweight shawl against her body making her shiver. It hadn't gone anywhere near as planned, but she considered herself, nonetheless, victorious.

She, Tiffany Sandleton, blackmailed him fair and square.

CHAPTER TWO

Feeling like a forgotten old mare let out to pasture, she cut her husband off right in his tracks at the doorway five weeks later, before he could slink into what he called ‘the billing and accounts room’. “Clifford, a word, if you please.”

“Yes? What is it?”

Glaring at him, she glanced quickly around the deserted upstairs hallway and proceeded to give him a blistering three-minute account of his unacceptable behavior. She’d waited for him for days, no, weeks on end, hoping he would come to her bed. Show her some morsel of attention. As time passed on she realized she waited for naught. The man hadn’t deigned to spare her more than a few hours of his time since they’d been married!

Where did he go all the time? Surely he didn’t spend every waking hour with Lord Wainhaven? If he did, how on earth would she ever entice him into her bed?

“We have an agreement,” she blurted in a tone

of desperation she could not fully hide, dignified though she tried to be. "Children would be produced as a result of this marriage. Thus far, you have yet to come to my bed. It's been five weeks, two days and I remain untouched. How, may I ask, do you propose to get me with child if you never show any," she blushed to the roots of her brown hair, "any sexual affection? By immaculate conception?"

"That would be nice."

"No, it wouldn't be! Given the lecher you most certainly behave like when around Alex, I demand you treat me with the same sensualness and lecherness due me," she retorted, scathingly. *Good grief. Were 'sensualness and lecherness' even proper words?* she asked herself. "I can't change my looks or reinvent my personality. I am what I am."

She went on a seething diatribe for two minutes more before she abruptly ceased talking altogether. Rewarded for her verbal efforts with a vacuous look pasted on her husband's handsome face, his eyes deliberately strayed to the tedious account books lying on the desk behind her.

"I demand a little of your time and person, Viscount Rathbern."

"I don't care what you demand. I'll make love to you when I'm good and ready and not a second beforehand. If I were you, I wouldn't be holding my breath," he replied in a voice heavy with

sarcasm. "Now if you'll excuse me, Lady Rathbern, I really have a lot of work to catch up on. I'm trying my best to keep you in expensive silks and satins."

Ha! He was doing no such thing! She possessed plenty of money of her own and she could and did buy many of her articles of clothing out of her own pocket, from her *private* account, and not the household's. So far, he hadn't troubled himself personally to buy her so much a hairpin. The lout!

He briefly eyed the costly dinner dress she wore in mild distaste before striding completely past her toward his desk, intent it seemed, on ignoring her very presence.

She gave him a look of entreaty. "Please, Clifford, you know we have a legal agreement."

"And I will honor our agreement, Mrs. Iverson—*Viscountess*," he forced out each word between clenched teeth, placing exaggerated emphasis on her new title, "when I am good and ready. I agreed to your contract demands for sex in order to produce an heiress and a son, I did *not* agree on a date by which I'd start. Here's an even better suggestion for you to consider: Why don't you hold your breath and wait after all, hmmm?"

Tiffany retorted in a voice just loud enough for him to hear. "Perhaps if you weren't so busy in Alex's bed you'd have some time to spend in

mine.”

He stiffened noticeably but instead of sitting down at his desk, he spun around, brushed past her firmly planted body still half blocking the entryway, and sauntered down the wide lengthy corridor. He kept on walking not once looking back, the hollow echo of his steps taking him farther and farther away from her.

Merciful heavens, she certainly botched that up. Her loud groan of frustration, when it came, bounced stridently off the walls and back to her ears. It sounded downright pitiful.

Her husband couldn't even be bothered to look her in the eye when he made his statements, she thought minutes later, truly miffed by that. *Was she that horrible to gaze upon that her husband couldn't stomach the sight of her when speaking?*

So many questions rushed through her mind, and so few answers...

* * * *

One thing could truthfully be said about her, the new Viscountess Rathbern mused the next evening. She made no secret she was an intelligent and well-read woman. Unashamed of her intellect she, quite frankly, never bothered to hide it.

Surely she could put those two attributes to good purpose? Perhaps tonight, taking a small

peek at her husband across the dinner table where he sat stiffly erect and oblivious to her presence, she could impress him with topics that would interest him? Hopefully?

"What are your ideas on the *Communist Manifesto* written by Mr. Karl Marx? That is to say, what think you of his theories, milord? What of Mr. Charles Darwin and his experiments? You know, his published work a few years back painstakingly captivated the many aspects of nature based on his worldwide journey. Do you think one day soon we'll successfully have trains carrying passengers underneath the streets?" She glanced up, hoping one of the subjects she rattled off, at least one of them, would create a conversational opening he would love to elaborate on, given his interest in science and theory.

"I believe Mr. Darwin's works, what little I've read of them, have little merit or interest to me, Lady Tiffany," he informed her courteously, without bothering to justify his reasons for his views. "I doubt the man has seriously ever left the country let alone traveled among the natives of any land."

"Why that's preposterous! It isn't true at all! Mr. Darwin is an educated, modest, and perfectly respectable man. I've engaged him in conversation on any number of occasions. Have you ever spoken to him personally?"

Silence. It seemed to stretch on with no immediate answer forthcoming.

Tiffany cleared her throat and tried again. "Of course, not everyone would agree on some unknown gentleman's ideas, radical or otherwise," she murmured, changing her tactics and her offended posture. "Actually, some think Marx is quite outrageous," she rambled on, "but not as outrageous as the revolutionary fever and unrest that gripped European countries, such as France and Italy a couple of years ago. Thank heavens we've been, to a large degree, unaffected. Have you already been to the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park? It is the most fabulous extravaganza. Perhaps we might attend one day soon?"

Oh good heavens, she really was rambling on with no clear, coherent pattern at all—a true sign of a desperate woman trying to engage the attentions of her distant husband.

"The *Manifesto's* logic is rather faulty." He suddenly spoke up after an interminable amount of silence, speaking of her earlier comment and ignoring all the others. "Capitalism is what creates innovation and the intense desire to achieve, and that is what helps strengthen a country." Beyond those few words he said nothing more.

Clifford, his gaze impatient, swept aside her subsequent attempts to engage him in further conversation. When he deigned to speak at all, he

was laconic though always unfailingly polite in his choice of words.

Damn the man. He would kill her with stilted courtesies! She stared at his shuttered, sculpted face, the dimple in his chin that begged to be fingered and kissed, and let out a sigh of pure frustration.

When Clifford heard it, he gave a cool smile and kept eating.

Buttery sage rolls and lobster bisque soup—one of her favorites—and the delicate bowls containing the steaming first course, were already served and cleared away. She looked at the main course of succulent roasted veal, glazed carrots, and new potatoes they were eating, her fork poised in her hand. “When can I expect to receive you in my bed, husband?” she asked bluntly after scooping up another portion of the potatoes, not caring that her question at the dining room table was absolutely shameful.

Clifford almost choked on his veal au vin at her brazen words.

Stubbornly, he refused to answer. Vexing enough, he didn’t utter another single word throughout the remainder of the meal.

* * * *

Three Weeks Later

Alexandre watched Tiffany, Clifford’s wife of two

months, mockingly as he sucked Clifford from base to tip in one protracted, erotic slurp. Opening his mouth wide, he took the head of Clifford's penis in his mouth and licked it over and under before sliding his lover's hard member past his lush, moist lips.

Clifford watched Tiffany too.

In fact, his eyes locked with avid intensity on her beautiful brown ones. He couldn't seem to make himself look away from her, just as he couldn't seem to hold back the sounds coming from his throat caused by Alexandre's powerful suctioning. "Damn, Alex, you suck good."

And Tiffany watched him getting sucked.

Clifford knew his wife's eyes focused on every lick, every kiss, every down-and-upward thrust of the fellatio he'd been receiving regular doses of from this man, and only this man.

Deep inside, it turned his wife on to watch. He could sense it. His little wife couldn't seem to walk out that door and leave them to their ongoing, wicked pastime. Something in Clifford churned pleurably at the naughty bit of knowledge. For a moment, he tipped his head back and groaned loud and long at the arousing decadence of it.

Tiffany swallowed several times. Her breathing becoming more affected as their deviant sex play rolled on, but she didn't move a muscle to walk out the door.

She stood transfixed.

Her disgust and arousal burned piping hot, quickly becoming clear as crystal to both men not more than a few feet in front of her. Her hands slowly found their way to her parched throat and down to her small breasts and stiff nipples, her movements caressing, before they landed on her tense stomach.

"Do we have you tangled in knots with our depraved loving, my Viscountess?" Clifford muttered softly. "Does it feel sinful to stare at two grown men, one of them your husband, the other his lover, licking each other until they explode?" Clifford's slightly hoarse voice was a study in seductive sinfulness all in itself. "Did you enjoy watching me suck Alex into oblivion with my mouth a moment ago?"

Speechless, she couldn't retort.

"Keep watching, little wife, for the grand finale."

Alexandre could barely hear his lover's moans over his own racing heartbeat. Clifford briefly grabbed the back of the settee behind him for leverage and moaned louder than before. Alexandre moaned too. He felt the instant Clifford stiffened and jerked back then forward under his expert oral assault. He was getting ready to come. "Come for me, Clifford."

In response, Clifford jerked backward once

more. Then he rammed his cock inside Alexandre's mouth with smooth, practiced precision. Once, twice.

Gentling his movements, he stroked the inside of his lover's mouth over and over. "Bloody hell, this feels wonderful. Every single time you do me. It feels good." Letting out a soft cry, Clifford's eyes locked provocatively on his wife's for as long as he could before finally shutting them against the slow tide of sensation wracking through him.

Alexandre threw a curious look at Tiffany. "Why are you still here? The show is over, Viscountess—or should I say "Voyeur," he remarked in sarcasm.

"Enough, Alex."

He and Alex made love to each other this way countless times, but it was the first time his wife caught them in an actual oral sex session. Having seen them only once before, she stumbled upon the two of them physically at it hot and heavy at the time...

Biting back a groan, he eased behind Alex and slowly stuffed him with his broad-tipped cock, and "How does it feel when I ease into you all the way to the hilt...stuff you full of me?"

"Don't play," Alexandre said in thick tones. "Give it all to me or nothing. Now."

"Gladly." Clifford slowly began to pump in and out. "More."

He barely stifled another loud groan before pumping

him with untamed abandon while Alex stroked himself. Until at last, both men were breathing harshly from the pleasure.

"That's it," Alex grunted in encouragement. "Yes. Move just like that."

Too close to orgasm, the soft sound of the door as it opened and shut closed proved no distraction. They already knew the name of their uninvited intruder. The Viscountess.

Much too close to stop, Clifford thought.

Neither man could hold back. Each cried out in orgasm while they stared in her direction, their eyes glazed over in passion.

Tiffany's eyes widened like two huge marbles at their actions and soft cries of satisfaction. Holding her hand to her mouth at Alex's vindictive smirk of triumph, she backed out of the room, horrified and deeply embarrassed.

The moment the door slammed closed, Alex promptly washed them both. After taking a brief nap, they proceeded to go at it once more...

Clifford snapped back to the present the second he felt his impending orgasm building and building, gaining in momentum. Felt the second his seed hit the back of Alexandre's throat.

Alexandre removed his mouth completely from Clifford's pulsating member, and immediately a load of cum started gushing out. Clifford staggered slightly when Alexandre took the engorged flesh, and milking it with his capable

hands, pointed his well-endowed cock in Tiffany's direction.

His seed hit her dress with a big splotch.

"Take a good look at the splattered delicacy drenched on your dress, Lady Tiffany. I know you want to taste it...smell it...touch it, don't you, Mrs. Iverson?" Alexandre's eyes became wintry, almost wrathful, as they focused on hers. "You'll never have him in any way that matters. Know that now. Not in his heart and certainly not in his bed."

"You think so, do you?"

She cleared her throat, still unnerved by what she'd witnessed. It showed in her movements and her expression. She had such an expressive face at times. But when she spoke, her voice didn't waver by so much as a notch. "You have a lot more confidence than you deserve to have, Alexandre, you perverted cock-whore."

"If I'm a whore, than what does that make your husband?"

"It makes him *my husband* and you the cock-whore."

"Dammit, Alex, shut up and stop baiting my wife, it's unnecessary and uncalled-for. I mean it."

Alexandre winked at her and he didn't do it in a joking kind of way. "Excellent of you to say so," he continued on, as if Clifford hadn't just chastised him, "and it pleases me to be *your husband's* cock-whore. Guess what? You are not."

One side of Alexandre's mouth lifted in a show of disrespect, and he put Clifford's large swollen member back into his waiting mouth amid Clifford's groans and sharply spoken reprimands.

"Ah, Alex, you'll kill me with that fat, incredible mouth of yours someday."

* * * *

After that episode, Tiffany would occasionally walk in on them, sometimes by mistake, sometimes intentionally, and watch the two beautiful elegant men, both so well-built and so well-formed down below, have scorching oral sex. Orgasms seem to flow free and heavy between the men, while they never touched her much less brought her to completion. They focused on giving one another pleasure, not her.

She remained a virgin.

Though she commented on this sad state of affairs a few times, Clifford appeared reluctant to take her virginity. One of these days, though, he would have no choice.

Early one Tuesday afternoon, Tiffany went in search of Clifford to confer with him about the fencing along the south border of their estate. Having already lost several livestock due to the poor condition of the fence, it would only get worse if something wasn't done about it soon. She

searched several places where the Viscount was sure to be at this time of day, but couldn't find him.

Dismayed at not locating him, she decided to try the seldom-used rooms near the west tower on a whim. She passed by a small, windowless room, only to hear a low muffled noise from within.

Curiosity seized her.

Quietly she opened the door and slid it shut, and then turned around to face the small, windowless room. Liquid instantly pooled between her legs at the sight before her. Her breathing hitched and she licked her suddenly dry lips, once. Twice.

Clifford lay flat on his back on top of a feathered mattress on the floor, placed there for that specific use. On top of him, Alexandre languidly pumped inside him while stroking Clifford's rock-hard penis. Dribbles of moisture coated her husband's blush-tipped head.

Removing his hands, Alexandre placed them on his lover's face, then his lips, finally on his shoulders, anchoring him firmly in place for his repeated deep thrusts up his firm ass. Alexandre pressed forward and whispered, "I so love doing this with you," as he ejaculated inside him. His growl of pleasure filled the room.

"I'm not through though." Clifford's behind, now sopping wet and slippery, was an easy glide

for more of Alexandre's lovemaking. "Oh, I'm most definitely not."

Clifford reached up and planted a hard kiss on the other man's lips. "Alex, take it slow and light, don't want us to spill too quick. Want us to enjoy this little afternoon rendezvous to the utmost. *Do not make me come,*" he ordered the other man softly, "I mean it. And don't make me come using those big, busy hands of yours on my cock either."

Alexandre complied. "Welcome to light and teasing from *moi*." His next strokes were whispery gentle movements, aimed at not fully penetrating the other man.

In silent stealth, Tiffany's feet seemed to move toward them like two feet obsessed. The two men, lost in each other's bodies, didn't notice her approach from behind until she was practically standing beside them. Startled, both men glanced up at her even as they continued their slow thrusting movements against each other, not wanting to stop the good feeling of it for a minute.

"Tiffany...ahhhhh," Clifford gasped through teeth clamped nearly together, "what brings you to us," and gasped again when Alexandre took that particular moment to twist deep inside him.

"Can't you see we're occupied," Alexandre interrupted, "and that I'm giving your husband the sweet pumping of his life?"

"Shut the hell up, Alex. Next time I'll be

sweetly pumping *your* ass."

When Clifford made as if to make some scathing remark to Alexandre, Alexandre swiftly drew back his shaft halfway and then plunged it back into Clifford's extremely slippery canal. It caused the older man to cry out in pleasure rather than give him the scathing remark he knew he had coming. "We don't need visitors. This is private."

"Didn't you hear the Viscount? *Shut the hell up, Alex,*" Tiffany mimicked the words at Alexandre, and fearless, she lifted one arched eyebrow sardonically at him. She took the last few steps until she stood right over them.

Then Tiffany did something she'd never done before when watching them in the throes of lovemaking. She bent down, put her hands quickly on either side of her husband's face and pressed her lips gently to his. Sticking out her tongue, she licked his lips, beckoning him to open for her.

Stunned, Clifford opened to her almost instantly. The moment she plunged inside his mouth, Clifford jerked like a lightening bolt hit him. Another jolt struck as his tongue began to mate wildly with hers, and he moaned frantically against her lips.

"God...what are you doing to me, Tiffany? Where did you learn to kiss..."

She didn't give him a chance to finish the

sentence.

Tiffany ate at his lips like a half-starved courtesan. It tantalized Clifford like never before. Drugging kisses from his wife while all the while getting fiercely fucked by a man who meant more to him than just a lover. It was enough to make a man come and never stop.

In increasing agitation, Alexandre began to pummel Clifford's ass with cock. But with Tiffany's lips sealed on his, kissing him like there was no tomorrow, flicking her tongue over his mouth and in his mouth, rather than causing him to break away from his wife, it took him straight into infinity and beyond. All he could feel was the pain-pleasure of Alexandre's harsh pounding into his wet, eager anus mixed with mind-boggling rapture. "Tiffany," he whispered her name.

She kissed his eyelids, his smooth shaven jaw and the adorable cleft between it, each side of his temples, and then she zoomed back down on his mouth once more.

And ate.

Clifford couldn't hold back, not with this double attack. "Alex, Tiffany, I can't hold back much longer."

Tiffany moved to stroke Clifford's swollen member, his large head flushed and leaking serious amounts of pre-cum.

Alexandre promptly batted her hands away.

Clifford took hold of Alexandre's hands in a grip of steel to forestall his actions. "Let her touch me, God, let her kiss me, Alex."

Sighing in nervous anticipation because she would finally touch her husband intimately, she leaned over and began pumping his member up and down in exquisite rhythm from tip to base with her hand. Her nails were short and well groomed, her fingers, long and supple. Her hands velvety soft. What she lacked in experience she more than made up for through previous observations, her feminine intuition, and her desperate desire to be a part of her husband's falling apart. She wanted to touch him there—everywhere. She wanted to be the one to taste his fluids as he toppled over the edge, and finally, finally she would.

Frantically, Clifford bucked up and down on Alexandre's deeply penetrating shaft as Tiffany worked his cock with her soft hands. And when Tiffany's mouth closed over his head, Clifford literally keened out his pleasure to the top of his lungs as loads of his creamy cum entered her virgin mouth.

Nothing on earth could have prepared him for these moments of pure bliss as he continued to spill his seed into her willing mouth. *Sex had never felt this way, never felt quite this glorious before*, Clifford thought, as his member slowly stopped

pulsating with fluid. A protracted, dreamy look entered his eyes as he felt Alexandre speed up his movements inside his body and heard Tiffany's whimpering sounds of completion. So aroused, she apparently orgasmed without anyone touching her.

Alexandre stared down at the only woman who could get so thoroughly and violently under his skin, watched fixedly while the little interloper continued to gently milk Clifford of every single drop of his essence like she was born to the task.

Yet against all his considerable will, Alexandre felt an awful riptide of pleasure bubbling up inside him. It rushed through every part of his body before it honed in on his groin. Growing stronger and stronger. He thought his brain would explode with the pleasure he felt.

Christ almighty! What was this feeling so intense it almost bordered on pain? Alexandre wondered, frowning slightly before shuddering as another sizzling wave shot straight through him.

The feeling only intensified for Alexandre and he began to tremble. "Bloody hell, this feels so good." Lightning zapped through his veins, actually painful in its pleasurable intensity. Without conscious thought, he began to plunder Clifford's ass in earnest over and over and over.

Like never before.

Nothing could hold Alexandre back.

Angry, restless, he was more turned on than he'd ever been in his entire life. When he couldn't take it another second, he tipped his head back, closed his eyes, and let out a string of expletives, mainly directed at Tiffany, before he, too, literally wailed out as one long incredibly explosive orgasm rocked him, plunging him deep into Clifford's dripping, hot channel.

Never ever had he felt anything like it.

Tiffany's mouth continued to gently enclose Clifford's cock even after her husband had no seed left to give. Her tongue strokes were as soft and languid as Alexandre's cock strokes had been when she first entered their space.

Each man finally opened his eyes and stared at Tiffany, at her lips and chin, glistening with Clifford's enormous release, both men knew he had never cum such a prodigious amount in his life. The look on each man's face was different though, one in wondrous awe and repletion, the other in cold detachment and repletion.

"You've won nothing, Tiffany," the Earl of Wainhaven snarled softly.

CHAPTER THREE

Clifford turned in the cramped confines of the two, widely spaced Corinthian style columns he stood between while waiting impatiently for Alexandre's arrival. At least they would have been spacious if he weren't standing there shouldered against three other broad-shouldered men. He gave a lighthearted laugh at a comment one of them said before casually glancing around the room. Then he did a double take as he caught a familiar woman's eye.

His wife's.

A look of complete surprise crossed his face. His wide-tooth smile twisted into something almost sinister when he bestowed it on her.

Tiffany swallowed, uncertain whether she should hold her own or start fleeing for safety. Cold sparks of irritation seem to fly off him and onto her, chilling her down to the bone. What on earth was he in such a sudden snivel about?

Tiffany smoothed a nonexistent wrinkle from

her powder blue dress of silk barège then fiddled with her black velvet ribbon bracelet, an accessory that was the height of fashion. Sudden unease rippled through her and her hand moved from her wrist to fiddle with the matching ribbon-styled strand of velvet fitted snug around her neck. He definitely didn't seem too happy at all to see her. If the stiff way he bore down on her, his steps quick and decisive, was any indication, he'd been giving her an earful.

He did not disappoint.

"Good evening, Tiffany. How did you get here? I certainly didn't bring you, or extend an invitation for you to bring yourself." He kept his voice low. "Is shackling me to you for all eternity not enough? Now you've taken to following me," he accused.

Heat suffused her face. "Despite how it may seem to you," her tone icy, "I had no idea you would be attending Sir Godfrey's little party." Little was hardly an apt word to describe the event, she thought belatedly, the place was fairly teeming with people.

"My, my" he commented in an undertone barely above a whisper, "don't you get enough already of seeing me with Alex—with and without our clothes," coldly amused at her blush. "I don't find your being here humorous, Tiffany. But since you're here and you're my wife, I obviously can't

ignore you. That would get the gossipmonger's tongues wagging. Now wouldn't it?" He placed his hand around her slender arm.

"Indeed it would," she snapped. "I could care less if you ignore me now or the rest of the night. Now unhand me."

"I think not. I'm taking you home." The hand about her arm tightened into a death grip. "Before Alex gets here," he muttered to himself.

"You will do no such thing," she snipped in an undertone as low as her husband's. "I came with the Callisters and I will leave with them. I'll remove myself from your immediate presence and find more friendly companionship." She glanced about the huge, crowded room awash with a vibrant array of silks and satins, for a likely group of people with which to mingle. "You, milord, can continue to stand about waiting for your lo-friend to arrive."

"You can come with me quietly or make a scene, and you wouldn't want to make a scene now would you, *Viscountess*? After all, that would ruin the reputation you're so desperately trying to cultivate with the upper echelon of society. Isn't that right?" He propelled her toward the front entrance, making his excuses to the Callisters along the way, hailed his carriage, and then all but tossed her in it.

Once inside, he casually flung his hat on the

seat beside him, his black hair rippling in feathered lengths to the nape of his neck like a midnight cloud of silk, and silently watched her squirm for the next solid fifteen minutes.

"Tell me again you weren't following me?"

He spoke out of the blue, jarring the uneasy silence in the speeding coach. She jumped in her seat. "I wasn't following you, milord."

"Stop calling me 'milord or Lord Rathbern'. I'm your husband for what it's worth. Use my first name."

"I wasn't following you, *Clifford*. We hardly speak at home, you never tell me of your plans. How am I supposed to know what functions you will be attending or not? I cannot read your mind, nor do I wish to, even if I were able to do so," she huffed. Her large brown eyes glittered like twin gems. She was half a second away from blowing out steam she was that angry-hot. *How dare he accuse me of following him around to social events like some lost stray!*

His head tilted to the side and he gave her a probing look. "Perhaps I was a little hasty in my judgment," he said finally. His lips turned up in a rueful smile.

"Forgive me."

His smile warmed her heart and sent a sharp kick of desire beating through her veins. "You're forgiven." She gave him a tentative smile back.

The following morning, he politely informed his wife of his whereabouts at the breakfast table. He would be in Bath all day and not to expect him for dinner.

* * * *

"Weatherson, I'll be in the library should the new butler have any concerns. He'll no doubt have many," Clifford remarked, muttering the last sentence under his breath. In the short time the new servant had been in his employ, the man appeared to be continuously beset with one problem after another—his questionable health notwithstanding.

"Of course, Viscount Rathbern. Should I begin making inquiries about securing someone else for the position, someone whom you feel might be more suitable?"

"No. No, let's give him a fair chance."

"How long might that be, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Oh, I don't know...maybe a few more months. It's surprising really. He came highly recommended by the Northrop Agency."

"Perhaps they spoke so only to be rid of him, sir?"

"You very well could be right, Weatherson," he chuckled. "Seen my wife recently?"

"Last I saw, she stood outside tending her new garden. I doubt she's there now though, sir."

"Tending her garden? What garden?" He looked a little surprised, it being the first he'd heard of it. "We have servants who excel at that sort of thing."

"I'm sure you're correct, sir. She appears to have a genuine knack for it. Been at it for the past three weeks."

"Does she? Hmmm. Very well, carry on."

When he saw his wife sitting peacefully in his favorite chair, instead, engrossed in the final pages of a book he couldn't make out the title to—one of his, perhaps—he took two steps backward intending to make a speedy retreat. At the last moment, however, he changed his mind.

He cleared his throat and strolled over to where she sat. "I hear you started a garden of your own," he said conversationally.

"Why, yes, I have. It's a small herb garden, to be sure, compared to the one I have at my parents' home. Some of the plantings were grafted from those back at home, and the others, I recently purchased. I wanted to start out small at first," she elaborated, glancing up after reading the last sentence of the book. "I hope you don't mind?"

"No, not at all. Tiffany, this is your home, of course I do not mind." He gave a brief sigh and glanced down at the book lying on the table next

to her.

"I see you've finished reading the laudable novel, *Vanity Fair* by William M. Thackeray," he remarked in wry tones, idly flipping through the pages of the novel. "I'm surprised you bothered to read it, Viscountess, given how much it mimics the pretensions and hypocrisies of our wonderful English society. The copy, by the way, belongs to a friend of my mother's."

"Really? You mean to say, it is not one of your own treasured reading keepsakes?"

"Sorry, but no, 'fraid not."

"I have to admit I snuck it out of your library because the title intrigued me, sir. I have not read it before. But once I started reading it, I couldn't put the book down. Believe it or not, I completed the book in a day-and-a-half—in record time." She smiled mischievously. "I endeavored to keep an open mind and therefore thought the book quite good, but the author has a devilishly weird middle name—*Makepeace*."

Clifford shook his head, changing his mind about getting her dander up, and instead chuckled. "The things you do are sometimes amazing," and realized at that moment, it was true. "As to the other, I certainly agree with your view on the subject—'Makepeace' is a most unusual middle name."

"Indeed it is." She smiled back. "The room

seems a little brighter because of your smile."

He colored at the compliment, and flashed her another one of his rare beautiful white-tooth smiles.

* * * *

Staring unseeingly that night at the vast darkness outside her bedroom chambers, Tiffany finally pulled the curtains closed with a snap only to begin worrying her lips with her fingers in a distracted air. Suddenly, she stiffened her shoulders, tied the sash of her grey silk robe around her trim waist and headed out of her bedroom.

Straight to the Viscount's.

Tentative, she rapped on his door. When there was no answer, she steeled her nerves and knocked again. On the fourth knock, he didn't inquire who stood outside his door but rather, called out impatiently, "Come in."

Sliding out of her robe, she twisted the knob and entered.

Her stomach churned as Clifford turned his hooded blue eyes on her. His expression gave her pause and she felt the effects of that stare all the way down to her toes.

Standing at half an inch over six-three and well-muscled, he was large enough to make her feel

fragile, slight even, though she was almost five-nine in her stocking feet. She leaned forward so that her brown, waist length hair obscured some of her form, but still his eyes roved over her barely clad body, flitting to her breasts before resting on the long length of her legs visible through the flimsy material of her shortened chemise.

Legs suddenly feeling numb, she faltered as she strove to walk in a tantalizing manner in his direction. She knew his gaze watched every step she took. Determined, she moved onward in hopeful eagerness and didn't stop until she stood directly in front of him. Maybe tonight he would make love to her.

Then he raised his eyes to her face.

A look of surprise and restrained hunger shone in their depths when their eyes locked briefly, but his expression became shuttered and for a moment, the derision she'd seen on his handsome face from times past seemed to intensify.

He raked one hand across the back of his neck, clearly agitated.

"Will you be taking supper with me and Alexandre tomorrow night in the dining room?" he blurted. "It will be a cold buffet, no footmen or servants."

"Cold buffet? I requested a hot meal on the menu for tomorrow night." *Christ! Why on earth did he ask her something so foolish as that? Did he have*

no sense, no decorum about himself? As if she would take supper with Alexandre! The very thought! A man she knew her husband slept with. And enjoying every moment of it. She'd sooner scour the man alive than eat a meal with him.

"No, I definitely think not."

"But I insist." His tone brooked no argument.

"Very well."

"I think it might be wise if you left now," Clifford murmured in an unreadable tone.

Short of raping the man, what could she do? Absolutely nothing. Picking up the shreds of her dignity she walked out of the room the same way she entered it—slow and tantalizing. She felt his eyes on her every single step of the way. It has not been totally in vain then, and the fact lightened her spirits.

* * * *

Promptly at six o'clock, Alexandre strolled into the dining room and began lifting up one and then another of the sterling silver lids, sniffing the covered contents of the evening's meal.

"The Viscount's not home yet, I see." Not expecting an answer or wanting one, he picked up a glass decanter of amber-colored liquid that looked like it might be Madeira and began pouring himself a glass of whatever the decanter

contained. Filling the glass until it was nearly running over the top, he downed the entire contents in one swallow as if to fortify himself.

“Stop that! You act like a common drunk.”

Alexandre rounded on her.

“Perhaps I shall simply whisk you away and take you into my bedchamber,” he chuckled snidely, “and slake my drunken, common thirst on your body since Clifford is not around. Don’t you just wish...Viscountess? Hmmm?” His smile was broad and patently fake.

“Go to the devil, Wainhaven and may he keep your sorry tail and that ugly, tiny, shriveled up thing you have hanging between it. I have no desire for you to ever touch me, you worthless, pathetic libertine.”

Alexandre shot forward with the force of a cannon, his vision one blob of pure red. “Today is your lucky day. Your insolent mouth is about to be rewarded you sniveling, little—”

Mere centimeters separated him from her flesh and just as he was about to snatch her, Clifford appeared out of nowhere, halting Alexandre in his tracks.

“I wouldn’t touch her if I were you, Alex. Keep your hands off her. If you want to get physical with someone, it better be with me.” Then he spoke in a seductive purr. “In fact, I’m counting on it to be with me.” He turned to his visibly

shaken wife, and spoke in the same seductive purr. "Tiffany, please leave us."

"But, I—No—I—won't. He should be the one—"

"I will bring a mountain of food up to you. Leave us, dear wife," his voice sounded like a silken caress in the room. "Thank you."

Gritting her teeth and giving Alex a blazing, triumphant look, which he returned in full measure, she stomped gracefully from the room.

"Now where were we, Alex?"

* * * *

Wednesday morning, two days later, Clifford and Tiffany found themselves seated on the flower-filled terrace soaking up the totally revamped landscape and the stately brick home's surrounding gardens. It was beautiful now, awash with healthy trees and a profusion of shrubs and flowers now that there was money enough to take care of it properly. They decided on taking a light breakfast of croissants, kidneys, eggs and sweet tea. Clifford always loved his sweet tea with loads of cream, much to Tiffany's and the staff's amusement.

"I wonder...would you like to attend the opera with me tonight, Tiffany. Your new friend, Lady Felicity, will be there as well, I'm told. Would you like to go?"

Her eyes shining at the invitation—her husband's first—she replied, "I'd love to."

He slid his chair back from the dark mahogany table and made his way over to where she sat gracefully sipping her herbal tea minus the sugar.

"Do you want to know something, Mrs. Iverson? I have this incredible urge to kiss every one of your fingers right this very instant." He gave her a devilish look.

Surprised delight suffused her features and she gave him an impish grin. "You may kiss whatever you like, sir, at any time."

"Anything?" he cocked an inquiring brow and grinned. "Anywhere?"

"Anything *and* anywhere." Boldly, she held out the fingers of one hand and held her breath.

Slowly and with deliberate thoroughness, he kissed just the tips of her fingers, one by one and then planted a single kiss on her palm.

"Mrs. Iverson, I think I could grow to like these sexy hands of yours very, very much," he whispered.

When the Viscount got back to the house that evening, he bounded the stairs to his wife's chambers with the vigor of a man half his age only to hear splashing going on in the chamber's interior room. He smiled faintly. From the sound of it, his wife was humming merrily away while taking her ritual bath. He shook his head. She

must be the cleanest woman alive. For the first time, curiosity overwhelmed him and with a determined stride in her direction, he decided to check in on his wife's ablutions.

Tiffany and her family ritualistically obtained their bathing water not from their house servants but from a water carrier who brought large casks of the liquid around to their homes, and to other homes, with just his two horses and wagon. His wife believed in cleanliness and enjoyed her languid evening baths. She claimed she loved the way the warm, perfumed water relaxed her as it caressed her skin. Later, no doubt, she would apply one of the various concoctions of lotions sitting on a table near her tub. Lotions he knew she made herself from oils purchased from a local shopkeeper and the fresh ingredients she cultivated on her parent's land, now on their land too.

In the middle of humming and singing softly to herself, Tiffany noticed her husband standing quietly in the doorway. Her words abruptly trailed off as one fragrant, soap-filled hand froze in mid air. "I thought you'd still be out to your gentlemen's meeting," she looked at him in inquiry,

Did her heart rate accelerate at the look in his eyes?

With ill-concealed hunger he didn't bother

trying to tamp, he strolled into the room and up to her tub and eyed his wife submerged all the way up past her breasts in the tub of warm water. At the moment, eyes intent on her pale flesh, striking light-brown eyes, and full cupid-bow mouth, eating a quick supper with Alexandre and his business associates was the last thing on his mind.

Her flushed cheeks revealed her embarrassment at having him as a spectator during her bathing ritual. "Good evening, milord," she stated with hesitation, dropping her arm back down into the water.

"Is it a good evening, my fragrant-smelling wife?"

"I-I believe so."

An amused grin lifted the corner of his mouth. "Perhaps you could use a little help with your task," Clifford offered, his tone playful.

He circled the tub like a large jungle cat before stopping and crouching down over it. From this angle, he got a clear, unrelenting view of his wife's naked body. Her slender waist, and mercy, her trimmed brownish crotch. He inhaled sharply. *Good Lord*. The woman completely trimmed herself down *there!* Scandalous. Heat instantly beat a trail straight to his groin. He willed his cock to behave.

He rolled up the cuffs on his spotless white shirt and leaned his forearms over the rim of the

tub, taking the soap and washcloth from his wife's nerveless hands. He soaped up the lavender cloth and ran it down one slender arm closest to him.

"Give me your other arm," he requested gruffly.

Tiffany replied, clearing her throat, "I can manage. Really. I've already washed my arms and face. I-I never—no man has looked upon her naked body before—you are the first. It's unnerving, unexpected, and very exciting." Before she could think twice about it, she murmured something else utterly shocking. "I have not washed my lower body, between my legs, husband."

"Then let me be the one to remedy that oversight." Clifford bent over, took the cloth and began leisurely washing between her legs all the way to the tip of her tailbone. Casually, he stood up and asked her to do so as well. "I need to ensure that I've properly cleaned you up."

"You—you've done a most excellent job—but I could use a little more work on those same areas of my body," she agreed.

Bypassing her delectable crotch altogether, he focused instead, on the cheeks of her buttocks and legs. When he finished, he glanced once more at the apex of her legs and then he slowly brought his gaze up to meet hers.

Hunger brighter than before shone in them. He

stared as myriad expressions chased across her face. She wanted him to take her out of the tub, ravish her like he knew she'd dreamed and hoped he'd do to her for months now. He could almost feel her bated breath as she waited for his next words, his next move.

Clifford cleared his throat, and then suddenly turning business-like, he strode over to where her fluffy towels lay, picked one up and held it out. "Come. It's time to get you dried before you turn into a permanent wrinkle," he smilingly teased. Not once did he murmur lover's words, or attempt to kiss her lips, or kiss her pouty nipples. He simply enfolded her in the dry, warm towel and briskly dried her off in a very un-lover-like fashion.

"Get dressed. I don't want you catching the chills," he murmured in her ear.

But his voice, so damn naturally seductive, couldn't prevent the chills that ran zigzag up and down Tiffany's spine. "Mmmm," she murmured. She leaned her head slightly back, barely touching his chest.

"You're right behind me...I can feel your nearness, smell your spicy cologne. So close to my touch..."

So close she could touch the hard bulge he sported between the expensive trousers he wore. A bulge that seemed to fascinate her to no end,

Clifford thought, dazedly. *If only she were bold enough to grab hold...*

His voice turned husky. "Don't tarry. We have to be at the opera by nine. I don't want us to be late." Then he quietly left her to finish getting dressed and have her maid style her hair.

Once inside his own chambers, his rampant thoughts bombarded him.

He played back the images of her naked body against the soft glow of the gaslights he'd installed in her room and dozens of others, just because she'd asked him and the money now available. Her slim waist tapering into equally slim hips. Her pale skin so tantalizingly smooth against the gleaming bronze of her large, old-fashioned oval tub she brought with her when they married. Good Lord! She was practically hairless down below, something she'd seen fit to do herself. It made him want to replace that washing cloth of hers with his tongue and leisurely slide it down her seam, licking up any droplets of water along the way.

The novel and unexpected rash of desire made him swallow hard. He could get lost in that body, he realized.

Immediately, he berated himself for thinking of his wife in such a manner. Feeling unsettled, he rang for his valet and then not taking the time to wait for his arrival, went over to his wardrobe and

began impatiently sifting through his clothing, one item after another.

Minutes later, Weatherson entered his master's chambers with brisk strides only to halt abruptly. Eyes opened wide, he 'tsked, tsked' at the shambles Clifford made of his room. "Sir, please, let me assist you. Heavens, your room is quite the untidy mess, if I do say so myself."

"Well then don't say it!" Clifford muttered crossly, still trying to decide on the perfect choice of trousers. *Christ, he was worse than a woman.* Knowing he was being rude, he smiled wryly in apology. "I could use your help tonight, Weatherson."

Finally dressed in what he considered the perfect evening attire for tonight, Clifford made his way downstairs to await Tiffany's arrival. His wife didn't keep him waiting for long this time. Given her penchant for being tardy, it surprised him.

Fifteen minutes later they were standing outside the carriage ready for departure. He held out his hand to assist her, and without hesitation she smilingly took it.

* * * *

The journey to the opera house passed by partially in pleasant, if not brief, conversation, while at

other times, companionable silence filled the coach interior. Several times they would catch each other's eye and smile. When they arrived Clifford alighted from the coach, his family's crest gleaming in the evening's light provided by several gas lampposts strategically positioned, and every bit the gentleman, held out his white-gloved hand to assist his wife.

Once inside, each nodded and smiled to several people they knew. Since Clifford knew a number of people there, they nodded and smiled a lot. Pleasantly surprised to see the Duke of Wenfield and his family there, they went over to speak to them for a few moments before finally making their way to their private seats.

Just as they were about to sit down, the arrival of a blonde male, an inch over six feet tall, caused a minor stir with the ladies on the other side of the packed auditorium.

It was none other than the Earl of Wainhaven.

* * * *

Tiffany spotted him at the same time Clifford did though he didn't utter a word at the other man's entrance. She watched as he and another male, about four and twenty took their seats. As the lights began dimming and the opera officially started, Alexandre turned his head in their

direction, his gaze zeroing in on them. Grey eyes gleamed like hard ice chips in the warm light of the vast room in which everyone sat. His sensuous face, though, was entirely devoid of any emotion whatsoever. Without smiling, he gave Tiffany and Clifford a slight nod and proceeded to ignore their existence.

Seeing Alexandre and the young man latching onto practically every word he whispered between scenes took some of the joy out of the evening for Tiffany. In fact, it made her want to puke. Why did *he* have to be here? Why come here tonight? Ruin her hard-earned night with Clifford? Drat the man! Lord, but the man's cold eyes could freeze hell a dozen times over.

That wasn't bad enough.

He looked at her with those same cold eyes, wearing that same expression carved in stone, during the play's intermission. He and Clifford barely spoke two words to one another during the entire interval.

He's probably wishing me straight into perdition, she fumed, as everyone jostled to take his or her seats after the twenty-minute intermission. The room darkened once more as the second half of the opera unfolded. Clifford leaned over and whispered in his wife's ear. "Anywhere?" he teased in a daring sort of way.

"Of course, husband. I tend to mean what I

say.”

From the beginning, the chairs inside the dark private box sat side-by-side with nary an inch separating them — a gift to them from her ecstatic parents on behalf of her recent marriage to the Viscount. It was fortuitous that the chairs, sitting a good bit away from the ledge, were so close and the box soooo dark.

“Very subtly lift your skirts up as if you’re trying to straighten them out. Re-arrange the material so it hangs over my waiting hand with the back of the dress hitched up near your thighs,” he ordered in a seductive manner.

The sound of his sexy voice and the things he told her to do brought a tide of fluid to her smooth nether regions. A tall man with a long and skillful reach. Anticipation held her spellbound and she did what he told her without much thought to the current scene being enacted on stage.

Clifford took his topcoat off and spread it over their laps for an added barrier in the unlikely chance of prying eyes.

Not once did his eyes look away from the stage.

He eased his arm between her legs to finger her through her undergarments. He made several slow circles and figure eights over her sensitized flesh. Then he pressed his longest finger right over her clit and held it there for numerous agonizing seconds.

She moved against it several times and muffled a gasp of pleasure.

"Shush. Not a sound," he ordered between his teeth while looking straight ahead at the play as though he wasn't doing something scandalous. He ran his skilled finger up and down her slit numerous times before withdrawing his hand completely. "God, you're wet," he said so softly it was if he talked to himself.

At the play's conclusion, Tiffany's eyes still somewhat glazed, they slowly departed the theatre alongside the rest of the audience.

* * * *

Later that night, Tiffany rubbed those same eyes and put the cleverly designed paper marker between the pages of the intriguing book entitled *Zoology of the Voyage of the HMS Beagle* by Charles Darwin. A wealthy, country gentleman, her father was one of the few people the sometimes-reclusive man allowed in his inner sanctum. She'd been reading his book off and on, along with an interesting novel called *Vanity Fair*. Having read Darwin's book twice already, she still continued to find it fascinating. She knew personally that at twenty-two he and Robert Fitzroy, an aristocrat who owned and captained the Beagle set sail in December of 1831, on an exciting voyage around

the world. She, a starry-eyed twelve-year-old at the time, gazed up at them both in awe. The expedition took the two men five notable years to complete. These days, the forty-two-year-old Mr. Darwin tended to be vague about the overall meaning of his abundant lab experiments. A man, after all, she reasoned, was entitled to his private thoughts and the conclusions he placed about life in general. Nonetheless, she and her father conversed about his travels and work, among other topics, on a number of pleasantly spent afternoons.

* * * *

About to retire to bed she stood up and was in the process of leaning over to turn off the gas lamp beside her reading chair, when a soft knock sounded on the door of her bedchamber.

Without waiting to be admitted, her husband strode in and shut the door with an audible click, double locking it. His movements leisurely, his body taut as a bowstring, he turned around to face her. "You know why I'm here."

"Tonight, my Viscountess, I have this aching need of wanting to do *anything*...to you...*anywhere* in this room."

Tiffany's heart skipped two beats and she straightened, and immediately she began to

unbutton her gown even as her breathing hitched in her throat. "Then do anything, anywhere."

"No. Don't touch another button. I want to undress you myself tonight, button by tiny button."

Then he advanced on her.

Clifford proceeded to slowly take off every stitch of clothing she wore, casting each item to the floor. When she stood naked before his heated gaze, he let his fingers slide from the hollow of her neck where her pulse beat in a frantic rhythm, leisurely down to her flat stomach. He inched his fingers to her naked flesh, sliding them just in between her outer lips, barely touching her there.

"Oh, my Goodness," she whispered, closing her eyes.

"You like that, don't you?" he asked, his fingers probing a little deeper into her already wet flesh.

She nodded, tilting her hips toward him so his fingers could slide deeper inside.

"Trust me, you're going to like what I'm about to do to you just as much."

He got down on his knees and placed his hands firmly around her hips. She was only inches from his face. His mouth.

But he held off from the temptation to taste her virgin flesh. He found her as soaked as she'd been at the theatre and he hadn't even licked her yet. Instead, he slowly thrust one finger inside,

moving in and out and then gently inserted two. Then three.

Goddammit, she's tight.

"Look at my three fingers...Look how deep they are inside of you. Does my moving in and out of you make you feel good?"

"Yes." Tiffany glanced down at herself, watching those expert fingers of his glistening with her juices. She wanted to come at the sight of it. Fresh liquid pooled between her legs.

"Can you handle me? I won't be gentle when I take you."

"Yes. Mercy in heaven, I'm begging to take it. Take anything, anywhere."

"Spread yourself with your fingers," he commanded, his breathing slightly uneven. "I want to look at all that pink flesh, look at the clit I know is already swollen for me."

"What?" Her voice shook, uncertain, yet her entire body trembled in anticipation as she watched his fingers continue their soft dance in and out of her tight sheath.

He looked up, his blue eyes blazing at her, and whispered, "I said, take your fingers and spread yourself wide open for me...my Viscountess."

This time when he said 'my Viscountess' his voice wasn't skirting the edge of sarcastic coolness. His voice was anything but cool. His voice flowed like liquid heat over her entire body.

She let out a small, fluttery sigh and reached down to do like he commanded. Using the tips of her fingers and spread herself wide open, exposing herself completely to him, her clit aching for his hands, his tongue.

"Is this how you want me?" she asked. "Wide like this?"

It was the first time he touched her so intimately, and she'd never done anything intimate, beyond a couple of chaste kisses with a man before. She stumbled as his warm breath seared her down below.

"Christ, sweetheart, just like that."

Clifford leaned into her and zoomed in for the attack. His lips latched onto her clit, and sucked, while his fingers drove inside her with measured strokes. She tasted so good and was so responsive to his every word, his every touch, his every command, he literally wanted to suck her to kingdom come.

Moaning quietly under his wife's labored breathing, he licked and dabbed directly at the tight, wet opening eagerly mating with his frisky fingers. Once again he returned to her clit, sucking it with a savage vengeance into his mouth.

That was all it took.

The first surge of her orgasm stole over her in seconds. Crying out, she tensed against his face, her entire body tightening against the hot tide of

pleasure.

Strong hands came around to clasp her buttocks, pressing her to him, his mouth continuing to work her as she came. "Lord, your cum tastes good, Tiffany," he whispered into her wet mound.

Tiffany slumped against his face, amazed at what had just taken place between them. "Clifford. This is..." her voice trailed away as she shuddered against the tongue, now busy licking the inside of her thigh.

"Oh sweet heaven, I don't think I can hold myself up," she breathed, her voice husky as he continued to press little kisses everywhere. His lips were gentle, yet his hands were solid and firm around buttocks, holding her up.

Tiffany glanced down at him, watching his mouth work their sensuous magic against her sensitized flesh and realized she wanted to experience that orgasmic feeling again; wanted him to take her. Hard. No matter that she was a virgin. She didn't care. The only thing she cared about at that moment was having him...deep inside her core.

"I've got you." As if reading her thoughts, he swung her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. He laid her down on the soft downy mattress.

"Are you ready for more?" He bent over and murmured against the valley of her breasts. His

warm breath sent chills of need all over her body.

"Are *you* ready for more?" she replied impishly, though her large brown eyes were glazed in passion.

He looked up at her, his gaze meeting hers. "I've been ready for you since you walked down the steps this morning."

He stood up and unbuttoned his shirt, revealing the broad expanse of his chest. A light sprinkling of dark hair dusted his chest muscles and tapered to the waistband of his trousers where a sizeable erection lay visible through his clothing.

"Let me touch you." Her mouth went dry at the sight of him and his erection standing so close to her, and without thinking, she spread her hands tentatively over his warm, muscled chest. She ran her hands over his hard stomach, lingering on his navel before letting her fingers follow the trail of dark hair that ran down to his waistband and beyond.

Trembling, she flicked her tongue over his nipples, from one to the other, laving and kissing the puckered nubs to mind-numbing effect. Both his and hers. She nipped and kissed a path from his collarbone down to the indentation of his navel. "Am I doing this right?" she purred, the sound vibrating against his skin. She began to unfasten his pants.

"Good God," he moaned. "You're doing everything right." He yanked the material out of her hands and hurriedly undid his trousers, pushing them down and off him.

Hell, he couldn't get them off fast enough.

Masculine eyes glittered like twin blue diamonds as he stood over her completely naked, ready to take her, satisfy her for the first time. He reached out and touched the hard, dusky nipples begging for his touch.

"Turn around with your back facing me," his muttered thickly. "I don't want to do any of this in the normal way with you, even if it is the first time. I don't think I could, even if I tried."

Eagerly, she did as he bid, shivers sprinting up and down her body. She was desperate to get her hands on him, and for him to get his hands on her. She didn't know what he intended to do with her—as long as he did it—it would be heavenly to her.

Tiffany turned her head to glance over her shoulder and caught a glimpse of her husband's jutting erection. She licked her lips in nervous anticipation.

He caught her looking at his stiff cock and his eyes grew even more heated. "Don't worry, eager wife, I'm going to give it all to you, every last bit of it. And you're going to take it, and love it." He knew in his heart that nothing about this coupling

would be normal or average, no matter that she was a virgin. Absolutely nothing. No, this would be no average coupling.

"Now get on your knees," he ordered in a voice as rich as black Parisian silk.

"Alright," she whispered, gripping the sheets with fingers that trembled. "I've wanted this for so long." I need you, Cliff. I need you to take me in every way imaginable. Whatever you do, however you do it, I want it."

Clifford groaned at the graphic images his wife's words evoked. He knew she meant every word of it too. And that made him hotter than Hades. His hands smoothed over her bare ass, his leg inching between hers to spread her open for him. And then his cock was probing her body, seeking entry. "You're not nearly wet enough," he threatened in her ear, teasing her.

In answer, her lithe body undulated against him in open invitation. "Please make me wetter then, milord."

Clifford growled an impatient swear word. "I don't want to wait. I can't wait. And I can't be gentle." He gripped one of her hips with one large hand while his other hand swung around to tease her nipples unmercifully.

"I want it any way, any place, remember?" Her words were broken sounds of syllables even to her own ears and she brushed back against him.

"Never again, never, never, never, will I deny myself the utter pleasure of your body," he promised on a growl.

Biting his lip, he took in a single shuddering breath, and then he slowly sank deep inside her excruciatingly tight body.

Once inside her, there was nothing leisurely or languid whatsoever about Clifford's movements in and out of her clenched heat. *Raw physical strength and desire fueled his moves as he pummeled her body while she pummeled his senses.*

And when she shouted out her climax, he was seconds behind her.

* * * *

Bright and early several days later, Tiffany dressed in a skirted, man-tailored riding habit in velvet green. She looked chic and self-assured in the new garment her parents bought her as part of her trousseau. Polished brown boots completed her ensemble. At eight a.m. sharp she met her husband at the stables, a smile lighting her face.

"Good morning." He smiled in return.

Without further ado, she and her husband selected their favorite horses and started out for a nice, lengthy gallop across their joined estates. "I'll race you to the fence," she challenged saucily forty minutes later. "Of course, if you're not up to the

task..."

"Ready when you are." He looked at her in challenge.

"And no cheating," she warned with mock severity.

"Of course...not," he teased, his blue eyes sparkling with mischief.

"On your mark, get ready...and...and...go!" she cried loudly, breaking off at a mad gallop before he'd even got a chance to hear the last word.

"Cheater!" he yelled out, whipping up his reins and making a fast dash after her.

She turned her head around and stuck her tongue out at him. Soon, however, they were neck n' neck. Again, she looked over at him and grabbed his attention by calling him 'sweetheart' and rolling out her tongue.

She slowed down and, surprisingly, so did he.

Wiggling her tongue in and out and from side to side in a comical manner yet to a highly erotic effect, her eyes gleamed with laughter and desire.

He hesitated, sitting utterly still on his horse, and watched the movement of that dainty pink tongue for a split second too long. She used the opening to her advantage and she shot past him like the wind itself.

She won by six hoof-beats.

"Aha! I won!"

"You cheated."

"Oh, no I didn't." She clapped her hands in delight, and then gracefully jumped down from her horse onto the thick green grass beneath.

Clifford's lips twitched. He tried to hide his laughter and failed. It spilled forth in a light-hearted sound that soon had Tiffany grinning as well.

"You can be quite titillating and humorous when you want, I see, Viscountess."

"That, I can. You know...I should get anything I want as a prize."

In one fluid motion he was on the thick, grassy ground as well. Rathbern gave her a small smile that lifted one corner of his delectable mouth. "Just one thing," he responded. "Tell me, Mrs. Iverson...what is it that you want?"

"I want you to French kiss me, tongue with tongue," she replied audaciously without a moment's hesitation.

Startled by her daring request, the Viscount stared at her for several long seconds, before giving her a refined bow. "I'm at your service, ma'am."

He reached out with his thumb and lightly caressed her chin back and forth. Bemused, his fingers moved to touch her lips and he stroked them around and around until he pressed against the seams of her mouth and delved his finger

inside.

"Suck it, wife...suck it like you'd suck me if I gave you half a chance."

Closing her eyes on a sigh so soft only she could hear it, her tongue skittered around his digit and begin to pull and suck at it as if it were her favorite sweet. She licked from the base where the skin met his thumb to the tip of his short, buffed nail and back down again.

"Mmmm," he moaned softly.

He pressed two fingers into her mouth and she greedily took them. It was heady to know that she would accept anything, do anything, he told her. Anything. Hot need raced to his groin, and before long he was breathing as heavily as she at the simple act. How would it feel if he were to take his wife, right here, right now, on the ground's floor, delve into her soft flesh, plunging into her over and over until they both cried out their guttural releases? Take her anally?

With those tantalizing thoughts in mind, he lowered his head toward her lips.

Despite the incredible unlikelihood, Viscount Rathbern had become seriously attracted to his own wife, and by the time he was done with her, he'd given her a hell-of-a-lot-more than a single French kiss...

CHAPTER FOUR

"I don't have a farthing of an idea what you're talking about," Clifford prevaricated, his eyes snapping like sparkling navy sapphires at the confrontation he wasn't ready yet to face.

"The bloody hell you don't!" Alexandre bristled at the bald-faced untruth. "I think you are well aware of I what I'm insinuating. Let's get to the heart of the matter, shall we?" *The man was attracted to that – that wife of his!* Alexandre fumed.

"Why are you here in my house, Clifford? Don't you even think about playing with me, either figuratively or literally." He walked up to him and looked him square in the eye. "Cliff, I saw you with my own two eyes hovering over Tiffany the other night. You grabbed her hand as if it was a life-saving beacon for a half-starved sailor. Somehow you managed to touch that dreadful woman one way or another throughout the entire damn evening."

"That so-called dreadful woman is my *wife*,

Alex. Best you know that."

"Then best you know this: I am not blind, and I certainly am not stupid," he bit out in his deep, delicious voice.

"No one said you were either," Clifford remarked in even tones, wanting to calm the aggressive, hotheaded man down. Shrewd and highly intelligent, Alex could be ruthless, relentless, and stubborn; he was the epitome of an alpha male personified, but then...so was he.

"Back off her, Clifford. I mean it. No lover of mine will parade his female doxy in my face, especially not the way you were acting. You are mine exclusively until I feel otherwise—"

"Think so, do you?" Clifford took the wisest course open. He silenced Alex with a long, hard kiss. Prying Alexandre's mouth apart with his tongue, he delved in deep and hot.

Repeatedly.

Soon, the only thing that could be heard in the room was the sound of two men standing braced against a solid wall of blue, in the throes of lust...

* * * *

Meanwhile, unaware of her husband's activities at that precise moment, Tiffany, standing in her powder room, preened at her reflection in the tall floor-length mirror, looking quite pleased with

herself. "Not too bad." She smiled. "Not too bad at all."

The Viscountess strove hard to gain some weight during the months of her new marriage. Worked diligently at putting on the extra pounds, eaten all manner of rich foods, in much larger quantities than she was accustomed to. Where once a pitifully thin, frail-looking woman greeted the mirror, a slender woman was now reflected, possessed of subtle but noticeable curves and a surprisingly well-turned ankle—thanks to the daily exercises she made up for herself.

"Perhaps I should market these exercises to other underweight ladies." She chuckled at the absurd notion.

It delighted her husband to no end to see his wife fill out so. Although Tiffany, still considered plain and her breasts less than modest size, he openly commented on her improved appearance on more than one occasion, bringing a flush of elation to her face. And he often stared at her long, shapely legs with ill-disguised hunger whenever he found her disrobed in her bedchamber. A hunger he took growing satisfaction in showing her—and sating—nearly every day, his other sexual activities, notwithstanding. On some days, he looked at her with smoldering blue-eyed heat, then took her at two different times, in two different ways all in one day.

That pleased Tiffany immensely.

It did nothing, however, to please the Earl of Wainhaven.

* * * *

Tiffany leaned back against the solid form of her husband a couple days later. She closed her eyes to the luxurious feel of well-defined muscles beneath the soft texture of pale linen and his arms about her waist in an affectionate embrace.

Clifford noticed the modified, toned-down crinoline hanging haphazardly atop the armrest of her chair. His wife, much to his amusement and delight, hated the wired crinoline undergarment fashionable women were beginning to wear these days.

"Why so silent?" Tiffany inquired curiously.

"I'm thinking about that crinoline on the chair you absolutely love to wear," he replied, striving for a serious tone. "For shame. My dear wife never wears them at all unless she's attending an important ball or gala. In fact, I rarely see her wearing one, even when out and about in London with me—her besotted husband," he explained, giving a sigh of feigned distress. Then he ruined the effect by chuckling.

"I hate them, that's why." That today's woman walked about in them or even descended the steps

without tripping and breaking her neck or an ankle, was in her opinion, nothing short of miraculous.

"Quite frankly I don't blame you, sweet wife. Fashions of the fifties are at great odds with the slimmer, low-cut gowns of thirty years ago when I was just a lad. Are they not? Cumbersome things, those crinolines," he teased. "Oooohhhhhh," he intoned, while using his body and the circle of his arms around her to make them both shudder like two marionettes.

She chuckled. "Oh, Stop. You're such a tease. I hoped you be dazzled by my near-nudity and wouldn't notice that monstrous thing sticking up in the air." Indeed, the wired hoop bellowed out like a huge birdcage, leaving the lower part of a woman's dress beneath the waist to drape over it. It looked like the women could take flight at a moment's notice in the silly contraption. Almost as irksome was the sea of nothing but black-tailed evening coats and white shirts invariably seen at societal functions.

"Try hiding it behind the chair rather than on top of the chair next time," came his dry reply.

"The Duke and Duchess of Wenfield are giving a ball the end of the week; we received an invitation this morning and I want you to accompany me," he murmured in her ear. "Buy yourself a beautiful gown and look pretty for me,

won't you?" She turned her face to meet his and he promptly gave her a lingering kiss on the lips. "The family diamonds will be waiting to grace," he punctuated his next words by planting several kisses on the side of her neck, "your long, lovely neck."

"I'll purchase the most beautiful ball gown I can bribe Madam LeRieux into conjuring up on such short notice. She's such a dear, but she's often booked with orders days, sometimes weeks in advance."

Slowly he caressed her bottom lip. "I know you, Tiffany. You'll get the dress you want." He arched an eyebrow and flashed her one of his dazzling white smiles.

The rest of the week sped by quickly.

The day of the Duke's ball began on an overcast note. It rained for most of the afternoon, and then added more insult by drizzling off and on for most of the evening as well.

Tiffany saw nothing of Clifford that day. It didn't take a genius to guess where he spent those rainy hours, or with whom. She wanted to scream her frustration to the heavens above some days.

This was one of them.

The two of them shared a wild night of lovemaking last night—even now it gave her goose bumps thinking about it—only to have Clifford apparently making wild ardent love to

Alex late this morning, and probably well into the afternoon. She didn't need to imagine the things they did...she *knew* the things they did, knew the multiple orgasms it took for Alexandre to be fully sated, and it made her heart race in her bosom with confusing and conflicting emotions.

Tiffany gave a wry, humorless smile and sighed. Well one thing she could say for her handsome, unfaithful husband; he certainly had a tremendous amount of stamina for one nearing forty. *The man is in superb shape.*

Sitting down at her vanity, she gazed at her reflection while running a brush through her hair with forceful, impatient strokes. Her mind in a whirl, she felt unsettled, at odds with herself, and not nearly satisfied with her lot.

Her daydreams took her to one evening last week. Fully in his cups, Clifford came home and stumbled down on the settee in her bedchamber, Alexandre's smell all over him. He grabbed her by the waist as she, in disgust, jerked away and flounced by him. Unbuckling his breeches, he grabbed her again. This time he did not let go. And in his sexiest tone, ordered her to suck him. But Alex's cum coated his cock and she scathingly refused and turned her head. Clifford gently but firmly pulled her head down on his crotch—and kept it there—until she relented and finally started licking him. He wanted her to taste Alex on him,

wanted to watch her, and the fact that she sucked every last drop of Alex's essence off his engorged cock turned him on incredibly, even in his inebriated state. Her talented mouth brought him to a quick, hard release and he rewarded her by giving her the same, though she fought him tooth and claw every inch of the way. That, too, turned him on, and he'd gone after the nectar between her legs in dead earnest.

Tiffany didn't speak to him for three days after that episode. Never in the darkest recesses of her mind would she ever say she liked the perverted activity. It made her blush nearly to the roots of her hair simply thinking about the episode.

Sexually involved with them both and basking in its decadence, whether she and Alex liked it or not, he apparently did not have any intention of slowing down. Oh, yes. The Viscount craved making love to his fervent wife as well as to his male lover. This fact became more and more evident as time sped on.

And more difficult for Alexandre to stomach.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Viscount found her in her private solarium painting watercolors of past countryside scenes. He smiled. Strolling over to her chair, he leaned over close to her to see what she painted. It was of past countryside scenes done in exacting details.

"It's very good and you're very talented, you know...exceptionally good," he remarked with considerable pride tingeing his voice. He turned his head toward her face and placed a soft kiss on the side of her mouth, then inhaled the subtle fragrance of the new perfume he'd purchased for her as a surprise gift. "Mmmm, you smell delicious. Makes me want to eat you."

"Go away. I have no desire for your questionable company," she replied in a crisp cold voice, jerking away from him.

"I happen to know firsthand, you love my company." He nipped at her ear with his teeth, and then swirled his tongue inside, eliciting an

involuntary shudder from her. With his fingers running along the curve of her clothed breasts, playing lightly over the material covering them, he made sure she could hardly suck in a breath. Her nipples were now tight little buds aching to be suckled, he noted with smug satisfaction on his face.

"Desist, Viscount Rathbern."

"Ahhh, formal, are we? Don't be. Relax," he cooed, feeling her stiffen against him. "I badly want to pleasure you from head-tip to toe-tip. Don't stop me."

"I do not have any desire whatsoever to be pleased by you," she said, her tone alarmingly steady.

"You're not a very good pretender. Your nipples are hard." He eased her chair away from her paints and propelled her to her feet to face him. His voice was suddenly husky. "I can see their outline through the fabric of your bodice."

Tiffany's hands rose at once to snatch his hands away and cover her breasts.

"You reek of Alexandre's cologne. It's unseemly, this entire thing!" Yes, her nipples were tight little points, and loathed to admit it, yes, her crotch was one moist pool of arousal. But she wasn't having sex with him. She would not. Making love to Clifford with Alexandre's essence all over him.

Disgraceful!

Yet she started getting hot at the appalling notion despite herself. Moisture accumulated between her legs like dew drops with each kiss her husband planted down her dress.

"When I'm done pleasuring you with my mouth, I want you to take me in yours. I love the way you make me feel."

"Better than the way Alexandre makes you feel?" she shot back before she could stop herself.

He hesitated for only a moment then the corner of his mouth lifted in a slight smile. "Better even than him."

He closed the tiny gap between them, halting so close to Tiffany that she could count the dark spray of hair on his broad chest from the opening in his loosened shirt; swore she could feel the plump round head of his cock poking against her gown. The air in the room became stifling hot with the heat and friction between them Clifford seemed intent on creating. She pulled in a deep breath and started to take a step back, separating herself from the close proximity of her new husband, when suddenly his hands were on her blouse, opening the tiny white pearl buttons and pushing the fabric from her body.

He brought his face near hers and looked into her eyes.

"Yes, I made love to Alex...now I need to make

love to you. I want to, Tiffany. Don't ask me to explain it. I just know I got to have you. The oral part can wait."

"You're a fool if you think I want you right now," she murmured, backing away from him for fear that one well-positioned stroke of his fingers between her legs would make her come.

"You play with my mind. I don't care for it at all."

"Never, ever. Tell me you like what I'm about to do to you," he whispered in return, bringing his lips close to hers. "That you love it, in fact."

Tiffany kissed him back, raising her left hand to capture the right side of his face, while she ran her palm along his inner thigh. "Yes, damn you," she replied, her lips separating only briefly from his.

In record time, he divested her of every stitch of clothing she wore except her thin chemise. That he left on to tantalize himself. His fingers honed onto the apex of her thighs and he immediately felt the drops of moisture coating her there. He plucked at her outer lips and then toyed with her clit. When she moaned, he simply pressed his fingers harder into her clitoris, and slid lower along her slick recesses to enter three long digits into her.

Then he pumped.

"I want to feel you...while you...make me...go over the edge!" she whispered, almost unable to stand still as she entered the first throes of her

orgasm.

Clifford pumped his fingers in and out, heightening the orgasm for her. When he stood up, his mouth immediately possessed hers. He wrapped both arms around her, one around her waist and the other around her shoulders, and pulled her back on the wooden chair, spoon fashion, on top of his lap.

"Shall I taste your cum, after I've sexed you, hmmm? Take your swollen clit in my mouth and suckle it...lick it clean of your juices?"

"I want you to, Cliff."

Thighs nestled atop of him, his firm muscles lent an evocative reminder of how his body felt unclothed. He pulled her more snugly into the hollow of his hips insuring her butt was in the position he wanted before grinding his hardness against her. It made her pull in a shaky breath.

"Tell me, are you quite comfortable?" he mouthed against her ear.

"I am, and I'm more than just comfortable," she managed to get out, her senses bombarded by his dominate masculinity.

Clifford turned his wife's near-naked body around so that he could finally see her face. *"I'm falling in love with you, wife,"* he confessed in a voice husky with unsuppressed desire. His eyes shone with his budding love. Love for a woman he'd never given the time of day to before their

marriage. "All those wasted years...this is what I've been missing."

He pushed several strands of her brown hair from her face and proceeded to kiss her with a thoroughness that left her dragging in air. Once more his eyes focused on hers.

"Show me you're falling in love with me back."

* * * *

The moment the dowager Viscountess entered Clifford's sitting room, her blue eyes sparkled and she quite literally beamed at her eldest son.

He knew that look. His mother was supremely satisfied at his state of matrimony—her son was after all these years finally and truly hitched. That she approved of the straightforward chit he'd married and hopeful of grandchildren posthaste, there was no doubt.

Smoothing back her unruly black hair, the color so like her son's at one time, but now liberally spiced with silver, she ensconced herself on one of the red velvet straight-back chairs facing his, and promptly settled in for a nice long chat.

Clifford tilted his head in amusement at his mother's latest gossip. The dear woman was a boundless well of information. He eyed her as she began leafing through the latest edition of London's satirical and oft times humorous

periodical, *Punch*. The magazine had been in existence since 1841, and his mother a regular subscriber since the establishment opened its doors for business, rarely missed an issue.

"Since when did you start drinking coffee?" he questioned when he heard her ring for the beverage along with a good dollop of sugar and her little roly-poly puddings—a confection of various fruit jams rolled in pastry and cooked—a few minutes later. Each of her sons inherited her sweet tooth.

"Why, I just started." She cleared her throat in a delicate manner. "Cliff, dear, I'll be going on an extended trip. This time, to America."

"America! For how long?"

"For a month, maybe two. You know how I adore traveling, dear. I've been nearly all over Europe and Asia, now it's time to spread my wings and set sail for the Americas. I intend taking only the minimum of servants—five."

"Two months! Mother, surely you jest. When his mother said one *or* two months, it invariably meant the latter. "You cannot possibly want to go to such a place for that extended length of time. What with the sail there and back, you'll be gone for more months than I care to count!" He stared at his mother in dismay. Why he should do so was beyond him.

His mother tended to do exactly as she pleased.

A trait, no doubt, he inherited from her himself. Even at the grand age of fifty-seven, she was still quite the social butterfly and an admitted wanderlust. Married to an older, doting man, his father, whom she'd adored since childhood, they'd born two strapping boys before his father died years later in 1831 from the first known Cholera epidemic, which sadly enough, killed around six thousand people. His father, visiting in Sunderland up in the Northeast part of the country, sadly contracted the fateful disease. He never recovered, passing away before he could ever make it back to his family. At nineteen and fourteen years of age, Clifford and his younger, and only, brother had been heartbroken. His dear mother never remarried.

Still trim and elegant, her ageless beauty held over the years. She loved the balls and fetes, the excitement, and being with friends she met during her travels. Perhaps she had found the fountain of youth in her travels? He smiled at that absurd idea. Consequently, she could be found at home occasionally, that is, when she wasn't traveling, or at some social event, or staying at one of her many friends homes, sometimes for as long as two weeks at a time. She never failed to let him know, though, of her whereabouts. More than once he'd found himself trailing on horseback to some place or another to see his mother's smiling face.

Occasionally, he slipped up and thought of his younger brother, Jonathan. Thought about how much he missed him. Reminiscenced about the many times they spent together, all their fun and mischievous deeds. Not quite as tall as himself but every bit as good-looking, Jonathan drew the women to him like bees to an overflowing honey pot. His sibling and a large group of friends went out one evening for a night of wild, questionable entertainment at the home of Le Comtess DeJereaux—known only by a select few for her devilishly risqué *merrymaking* soirees, as she liked to called them. His baby brother would never be seen nor heard from again.

Jonathan's friends and Clifford's own well-paid sources told him that the last anyone saw of him, his brother faltered half foxed, singing loudly at the top of his renowned second tenor's voice, flung himself tipsily into his carriage. He'd been on his way to their family's other country estate several miles north of Tewkesbury, not far from the impressive Severn River, the longest river in England whose length ran through the western part of the country. Maybe some type of accident. Who would ever know now? An accidental drowning? A cutthroat could've killed him. Hell, any number of people could've killed him; he made adversaries in low and high places given his propensity towards the ladies—married or

otherwise—and his other secret life.

Everyone, including his grieving mother and himself, now presumed his dashing brother and Harry Gibson, his faithful driver as well as his valet, Josh Callow, all dead. That had been nearly three years ago in late 1848.

“Well, my dear, I must be off. I promised Clarice to go over her daughter’s trousseau and wedding plans with her.” She stood up to her full five-six-inch height and went over and rose on tiptoes to kiss her less-than-pleased son on the cheek. “I’ll keep you posted, as always, to my exact location once I leave English soil...early next week. Monday.”

“Early next week?” he sputtered. “But it’s already Tuesday! That’s only six days hence!” Clifford could hardly afford to fuss. At twenty-four, he’d spent the better part of six years off and on in the exotic country of Thailand. During that time he stumbled across the path of three quiet and rather humble older men, all brothers, who were every bit in their fifties but astonishingly enough could pass for being in their thirties. The Phunejs taught, and he avidly learned, the secret ancient fighting arts. To this day, he trained and honed his now considerable skills in the absolute privacy of his athletic room. The household rule: No one, with the exception of his now deceased brother, a man with his own unique brand of

fighting skills, ever disturbed him when he entered that room.

“Yes, my dearest Lord Rathbern,” she replied tongue-in-cheek, patting the other side of her son’s face in affection, “it is. I didn’t tell you sooner because I knew you’d try to talk me out of it. So be sure to come see me this weekend. I love your visits, you know.”

“Humph,” he snorted.

She simply smiled serenely at her eldest son.

* * * *

The evening of the Duke and Duchess of Wenfield’s festive ball finally arrived.

Clifford, deep in conversation with one of his servants, his back faced the winding steps to the second floor. When he heard his wife finally descend them, he turned slowly around to greet her with a charming smile.

The smile faded from his sinfully handsome face as he stared at his wife, transfixed. She had never looked more attractive.

The diamond set, comprised of a dangly pair of teardrop earrings and a matching necklace made up of one large round diamond in the center followed by a row of smaller diamonds on either side and worth a tidy sum, glittered on her long, swan-like neck. Her hair was fashionably dressed

in a most becoming style, with ringlets framing her face. And her gown...her gown fit her to perfection. The dress, modestly cut in the bosom, was made of some delicate fabric from Paris. Rich ivory in color with tiny silver threads running through it, it contained several rows of the silver material sewn at its hemline. Silver material fashioned in a bow on each side of the gown only heightened its effect. Draped over her left arm was a wrap made of the same ivory and silver material. The entire outfit seemed to sparkle every time his wife moved in it.

Lord Rathbern took a step toward her and swallowed, his suddenly dry throat nearly choking him. Solemnly he took his white-gloved hands and placed them on hers. He planted a lingering kiss to each of her palms causing her to flush a becoming shade. He wrapped one slender arm around his own and turned his head to glance at her once more. His eyes shone with more than simple heat. A great deal more.

"Are you ready to depart, Mrs. Iverson?"

"I am indeed, husband." She looked over at him and smiled.

"Then let us be off. Our carriage awaits."

It was not long before they were rambling toward an assortment of perfectly coiffed trees and flowering shrubs that lined the long cobbled driveway leading to the Wenfield's country

manor.

"The Viscount and Viscountess Rathbern," the doorman droned in announcement when they arrived. The Duke and Duchess of Wenfield, both in their mid-fifties, gave a genuine smile of welcome when the younger couple greeted them. They were exceedingly fond of Clifford and his family, and always had been, having known his parents when they were all just children.

"My, don't you look absolutely lovely tonight, my dear Tiffany," the Duchess exclaimed in her forthright manner. "You have a most becoming bloom to your cheeks this evening."

Tiffany curtsayed and smiled. "As do you, your grace. Your gown is a statement in class and elegance," she said in a sincere tone. The duchess knew how to emphasize her strengths and understate her weaknesses—and she often showed it in the unerringly gracious style of the clothes she wore on her slightly plump figure.

The Duchess beamed at the genuine compliment she read on Tiffany's face. "My dear, I've been meaning to talk to you for simply an age."

"It's only been a few days since I saw you last," Tiffany murmured in amusement.

"I know. I know. But still, I—"

"Ladies," Wenfield cut in congenially, "if you don't mind, I need to talk with Lord Rathbern—"

"What?" his wife exclaimed. "The man just arrived, Harold, not more than two seconds ago, and you already want to talk science or research, or some such. Surely it can wait, dear?"

The Duke turned a beseeching eye on Tiffany and his wife. "It'll only be a few moments, dear ladies, I promise. Don't you agree, Rathbern?"

Clifford squelched a good-natured groan and pasted on what he hoped was an encouraging smile, rather than a pained one. When Wenfield started talking business, or anything else for that matter, the man could prattle on for quite some time.

Both gentlemen took their leave of the ladies soon after, once they saw to their comfort and made sure each sat down with cup of punch, and a veritable pile of their favorite treats on the their laps.

"That ought to keep them busy for a few minutes," Wenfield whispered to Clifford in a conspiratorial undertone...

* * * *

Thirty minutes later, found Tiffany passing quite a lively time with her friend, Lady Felicity—the Viscountess of Altmore—and their hostess, the Duchess of Wenfield. Her poor husband still ensconced inside his Grace's study talking

business, and politics, no doubt.

In the midst of taking another bite of her food, Tiffany suddenly felt a distinct chill skitter along her spine.

Quickly scanning her immediate area and seeing nothing untoward, she shrugged it off and turned back around. She refocused her attention just in time to catch the latest outrageous tidbit on Mr. Iron Wrinkleman which Lady Charlotte, the Countess of Lansdowne, strolled up to confide. The gossip elicited amusement and sympathetic chuckles from each woman. The diminutive and bespectacled man prone to jibes about his unfortunate name, made advances of adulation toward Lady Charlotte regularly, a woman who beat him by a solid six inches in height and a set of good teeth.

Again Tiffany felt it, but stronger this time.

Every pore on the back of her neck prickled.

Startled, her heartbeat turned up another notch. This time, shifting on the balls of her low-heeled evening shoes she stood up to her full five-ten height and turning clockwise, her glance swept across the crush of revelers in the opulently decorated ballroom. Famed for her lively, fun gatherings, The Duchess, could never be called a prude. Consequently, she always drew a packed house whenever she deigned to give any sort of festivity. Tonight was no exception.

She saw him out of her peripheral vision.

Across the room The Earl of Wainhaven stood as still as a Roman statue while people passed to and fro in the front and back of him.

His cool, ice-grey eyes stared directly at her.

Unblinking, he continued to stare at her intently. His expression frozen, as though carved in sub-zero ice.

Loathsome man! She huffed silently to herself, deeply unnerved, though she appeared calm and unruffled on the surface. Was he thinking about trying to kill her this very minute? The many ways he *could* kill her? What to do with her body once the deed was done? Where was Clifford? She wondered nervously as her gaze avoided Alexandre's completely in the hopes her eyes would fall on her husband's instead.

Minutes ticked by one tumbling right after the other.

* * * *

God's hamstring! Could he go nowhere in which that woman wasn't also there? Alexandre seethed.

Valiantly he tried to hold his crazy, rippling emotions in check but they threatened at any moment to leap out of control and make a mockery of his icy calm. It had taken only one

look at one woman to drive him to this insane fury. She was slowly taking up more of Clifford's time and he detested her for that. Detested her period. He saw the moment her glance flitted around the room. A nervous reaction. He knew her well enough by now to know that.

He smiled ever so faintly. It held not an ounce of humor. Then with slow, purposeful strides he made his way around to the other side of the room.

"Your grace." Alexandre inclined his head respectively toward the Duchess. "Ladies." He bent in a gallant, gentlemanly manner over the hands of Lady Felicity and Lady Charlotte. His head tilted at a slight angle and the soft lighting in the room bounced off his thick hair making it appear as if it were raw spun gold. He flashed all three women a white dazzling smile before landing his gaze on Tiffany. Stiffening almost immediately, the movement so subtle it went by unnoticed. His smile became forced. That, too, went unnoticed, except by Tiffany. He could tell by her answering stiff posture.

"Ah, Lady Tiffany, you're looking quite charming tonight," he replied in a modulated tone, eyeing her lovely dress—and the family diamonds Clifford put around her neck, probably as he'd kissed his way down her navel. Not by so much as a flicker of his eyelid did he betray the absolute

distaste that notion brought.

"Thank you, Lord Wainhaven."

"Where is your husband? I haven't seen him tonight. Making his rounds no doubt and talking science."

"He's with the Duke," the Duchess enlightened Alex with a pleasant smile before Tiffany could do so herself.

If she would have.

"Ah, well, in that case, Lady Rathbern...may I have this dance?"

She was given no choice but to accept.

Once on the dance floor she managed to fake a smile and surreptitiously hiss at him at the same time.

"How *dare* you ask me to dance? A waltz of all things. Why?"

An unnamed chill followed by heat crawled down Alexandre's spine. He didn't like the sensation. It was an uncomfortable feeling, like being zapped by pure lightening. And he subtly jerked her farther away from him with a soft snarl.

"I did it because your dance card isn't filled," he countered sarcastically and then turned his head and smiled blithely at a dancing couple he'd known for years, despite the fact that he seethed in bottled-up rage from the inside out.

"Tell that to someone who knows better," she snapped back in low tones. "You did it

deliberately to make me feel uncomfortable.”

“And I did it because I knew you couldn’t gracefully refuse in front of those nice women. I gave you no choice. How comfortable are you feeling now, Viscountess? *I hope not very.*”

“Shut up, despicable pervert.”

CHAPTER SIX

"I say she stays."

Clifford's tone was unyielding. "Jesus' left foot! You and Tiffany are often at each other's throat much like my hounds would be to cats, if I owned any cats. Praise be I don't."

"She goes, Clifford. I mean it. I can't abide that ugly hoyden not another minute."

"Alex. She's my wife. I can't just drag her to some obscure far northern estate or hovel and leave her there to rot."

"I don't see why not."

"That's right." Tiffany rose gracefully from the high-back chair she'd been quietly sitting on sight unseen by the two men. "I'm his wife. Much as you'd like to be, you home-wrecking lecher," she aimed her glare right at Alexandre, spearing him with her usual look of challenge. "I am mistress and financial assistant of this estate. I tell you what? Why don't *you* move to some obscure far, far northern estate or hovel – where *you* belong?"

That did it.

In two seconds flat, before Clifford could stop him, Alexandre stood there breathing down Tiffany's neck. His hands shot up and grabbed her by the throat choking her. "You sorry excuse for a woman." His grey eyes blazed with unleashed fire into her beautiful brown ones.

Tiffany's mouth parted in a ragged gasp as she watched Alexandre's wrath fall upon her head at pointblank range. He shook her like a rag doll. Nothing could stop him. Not her, not Clifford.

"Alex. Stop. If you kill her, I swear I'll kill you myself with my own bare hands! Leave her the hell alone!" Clifford gritted out. He grabbed Alexandre by the shoulders and pulled them so hard he tried to tear them from the Earl's sockets.

Alex brushed his attempt, and the considerable pain it caused, away with barely a reaction. His sole intent focused on the woman in front of him. "Leave me, Clifford. I intend to finish off this unsightly thorn in my side once and for all." His look was full of venom and a mix of emotions no one could name.

A single tear slid from each of Tiffany's eyes and slowly fell down her cheek.

Riveted, Alex watched them fall from her expressive eyes. What he saw there shook him profoundly. He saw tremendous rage...and gut-wrenching desire. For him.

With a savage oath, he elbow-jabbed Clifford off of him with such a force of strength, it knocked the other man several yards away clear onto the floor. He didn't bother to glance in Clifford's direction to see if he was hurt. At this one single moment in time, he didn't care.

"This is what you've been wanting, isn't it, Tiffany?" Alexandre whispered harshly.

Then he bent down and covered Tiffany's lips with his own in a brutal, plundering kiss. It didn't matter that she was another man's wife. It didn't matter that his actions made no logical sense. None of it mattered. The only thing that mattered was his determination to drive this confounding, irritating woman away from Clifford...and from him.

What was meant to punish, to embarrass, to shame, to disgust changed by mercurial degrees. One kiss blended into another. Clifford heard the clap of thunder as blood roared through his veins. Again and again, lightening zapped across his nerve endings. Alternating between chilled and hot it shocked his nervous system, hardening his cock into rigid steel.

Instead of pushing her away, he drew her closer. And closer still. Their bodies snapped together like two rubber bands and locked within their embrace. He tried to say her name but she swallowed his words and his very breath in an

unending kiss.

By the time Clifford could forcibly drag Alexandre from his wife, all three of them were breathing heavily.

"What the hell are you doing! What got into you just now?"

Alexandre gave him a mocking smile. "Who knows?"

But inside, he was quaking in his expensive leather boots. The very foundation he stood on seemed to shift beneath his feet and continued to do so as he'd thoroughly ravished the mouth of another man's wife. He still remained dizzy from it and from her kisses. A woman he professed to hate. Had not Clifford been successful at forcefully yanked him away, how far might he have gone with her? *To the heavens and back*, a small voice inside him said. Dear Lord. It didn't bear further scrutiny.

"I asked you a damn question, Wainhaven," Clifford demanded. Incensed at the other man's roguish, insulting behavior toward him and his wife, he waited all of two seconds for a reply.

Then he drew back his fist and took aim.

One tightly cinched fist whirled through the air and connected with Alexandre's upper jaw in a satisfying sound. "I ought to call you out. Many men have been killed for less. Do you expect me to stand here in all honesty and watch *my wife* in the

clutches of someone else? *Any goddamn one else?*" he barked, hurling the words at Alexandre in fury and jealousy.

"Answer me, Wainhaven!"

"But I have no answer to give you, *Rathbern*," using the other man's last name in a deliberate mimicry, he folded his arms across his chest. Alexandre didn't retaliate physically; he just stood there still looking somewhat dazed.

"I think you should leave," Clifford bit out, prepared to hit him again at the slightest provocation. "Right now. Do not bother *gracing* us with your estimable presence again."

The Earl of Wainhaven jerked at his cuffs with unsteady hands and bent to retrieve his brand-new black top hat, which had fallen to the floor in the ensuing ruckus. "Gladly. The two of you are slowly driving me out of my fucking mind."

Several hours later, without saying more than a few carefully chosen words, Lord Wainhaven handed his crumpled hat to his loyal butler and swiftly strode down the long hallway to his extensive library. Once inside, he paced the floor for what seemed like the hundredth-and-one time. His full lips grimaced into a mirthless smile. Immediately, he rubbed his swollen jaw.

What has gotten into him?

Now he was out of sorts with the only man he felt deeply for, and on top of that, bewildered by

his soul-defying reaction to the man's wife. They practically devoured each other's mouths right in front of Clifford. All but smothered each other, their bodies were so closely wrapped. After all these hours, he could *still* feel her heat searing him. The all-too-brief encounter had been implausible. More than incredible. Never, ever, in all his years did he feel anything remotely like it with any woman—thankfully few—in his fallible youth. Or any other man.

What a bloody tangle!

And now—now all he could think about was making love to them both.

Sure, initially he tried to push her away and keep Clifford for himself. In past times, he thought the jealousy he felt was strictly over Clifford.

Had it been over Tiffany as well?

No matter.

Now, he'd give anything, his wealth and his lands to have another chance at getting them back in his life. Together. The three of them as one. It has to be that way. He would accept nothing less.

He would have his lover, Cliff, and ultimately and most importantly, Tiffany as well.

* * * *

After a week passed without seeing either of them, Alexandre's body began to fairly ache for that

novel kind of lovemaking he started to fantasize about. A chance to plunder their bodies. To taste, to touch.

He grabbed his mind and mentally shook it. *Stop this insane madness. Look at you. You're a pathetic wreck.*

Alexandre DuPraden, debonair and suave Earl of Wainhaven, smoothed back his rich golden hair into some semblance of style. Then he picked up his fashionable walking stick, and strode with determined intention out his front door. with one agenda in mind: To get good and bloody damn drunk at his favorite riding club less than an hour driving distance from his home. He would forget about them both if it killed him.

He didn't tarry long, however.

He soon tired of the smoky atmosphere and supercilious ribaldry taking place at the club. Could none of them talk of anything else besides their mistresses? He thought Clifford might show up, hoped he would, but he didn't. It was just as well, he supposed. He downed three stiff drinks in rapid secession and made his way outside to his waiting carriage.

* * * *

"John, I'm not ready to turn in just yet. Drive around for a spell. I want to think. I'll inform you

when I've deemed it enough and want to go home."

"Yes, milord. Any particular place you be wantin' to go, yer lordship?"

"Yes, drive to Cli—No, just drive all over town," he replied firmly on a dejected sigh.

A half hour passed by in a gloomy blur. They just turned a sharp corner where the less desirable side of town began when a woman raised her voice in outrage, then she yelled at the top of her lungs for help.

Alexandre peeped out in time to see a well-dressed woman in a cloak covering her from head to toe tussling with a man almost twice her weight. "John," he shouted. "Stop the carriage at once."

John slowed the carriage without delay, but turned to glance askance at his employer in concern. *Was he trying to get himself killed over a woman he didn't know?* his bewildered look seemed to question.

Alexandre heard a threatening male voice not far from his carriage. In one reckless leap, he jumped to the ground and took off at a run. The ruffian stood with his back turned to him, his loud voice demanding the woman shut up—or else—as he tried to wrench the woman's purse and jewelry off her person. A rush of pure adrenaline sped through Alexandre and it galvanized him with

speed he never knew he possessed. Quiet as a furtive shadow, he walked up behind the man and pointed the barrel of his pistol dead center in his back.

The young man stiffened.

"If you value your life, you sorry piece of work, you will leave the lady alone. Whatever you have taken, give it back." Menace laced Alexandre's cultured tones as the hard glint of steel in his hand made itself known and felt.

* * * *

"I meant no harm, guv'." The hulking pickpocket, about eighteen years of age—far from being an idiot—got the message. He hastily turned over the ring and bracelet to his victim and quickly scampered off with his life intact.

The woman pulled the hood of her cloak tighter about her face to hide within its voluminous folds, no doubt embarrassed at being caught in such a predicament. "If my husband finds out about my foolhardiness, I'll most likely be getting a well-deserved tongue-lashing for this little stint well into next week." She said the words in a soft, shaken manner, her words slightly muffled beneath all the folds of her headwear and the turned angle from which she spoke.

Alexandre reached out touch the cloaked

woman's arm in a calming manner but decided against it so as not to unnerve the poor woman any further. He was appalled no one saw fit to come out and aid the woman. They heard her screams just as surely as he. Disgraceful but perhaps all too common, he thought, and shook his head. Though he couldn't see her face with her back turned to him, he knew by the cut of her coat and reticule she was a lady of quality.

"He won't find out from me, I assure you. Are you hurt, miss?" He gently led her from the middle of the road away from the prattling carriages so she could gain her equilibrium. He felt odd all of a sudden, tingly, but squelched it. *Downed that liquor much too fast.*

"May I give you a lift home? My carriage stands waiting just down the street. I'm respectfully at your service, ma'am."

"No—no, I—I'm not hurt, just badly shaken. I'd very much appreciate the offer of a ride, sir, and gladly accept. I fear I was deep in thought, wool-gathering you know, and I became lost." The woman dropped her hood, then turned around to thank her savior, and gasped in shock.

Lord Wainhaven stiffened visibly. Standing in front of him, so very close, was the only woman who'd ever entered his dreams at night.

Lady Tiffany.

"You," they both said softly in unison.

Alexandre didn't mean to, not at that moment, he really didn't. He let out a shaky sigh, and without preamble, his full, plush lips swooped down and fastened immediately on hers. The same tendrils of sensation began to wrack through his body the same as before. The first kiss was hot and hungry enough to sear his dick through his trousers. And he kissed her again.

Unheeded, he gently pushed her into the darkened alcove of the building, one of many that literally seemed to be squeezed in together. *Yes...God, yes.* "Keep kissing me. Don't stop."

He sighed a jerky kind of sigh on her wet, parted lips before rational thought of where they were temporarily fled his brain.

* * * *

Only the sound of gunshots in the distance, probably from one of the saloons, broke into his concentrated effort to permanently weld his lips to hers. He wrenched his lips from her tempting ones and tangled his arms tight around her upper waist. "Come. My carriage awaits, Tiffany."

"That's Lady Tiffany to you," she replied archly though her breathing was heavy and her eyes dazed from their torrid embrace.

"Don't start or I'll be giving you a tongue-lashing of another kind." He smiled at her blush

and then helped her up into his carriage. *I intend to tongue-lash you anyway*, he muttered silently to himself. *And it can't wait.*

The opportunity had come his way and he did not intend to let it get away untapped. The perfect chance to get this need to be deep inside her out of his system. All he needed was one single orgasm with her, he thought feverishly, to cleanse himself of this sudden crazy lust for her. He would leap through the fires of hell to insure he got inside her tonight. His mouth would be on the pale flesh rising and falling below the collar of her silk brown dress, and his cock in her snug heat before the carriage arrived at her house.

He was not a betting kind of man, but on this, he would bet his life.

* * * *

Alexandre sank back onto the seat cushion opposite hers and fixed her with a shuttered stare, his index finger stroking his bottom lip back and forth.

"Stop that."

"Stop what?"

"Stroking your lips like that. It's unseemly for a man with your large lips to do so."

"Does it arouse you, Lady Tiffany? To watch me finger my lips? Would it be better, perhaps, if

you watched me finger myself in other places, instead?" His teeth flashed pure white in the dim confines of the spacious but unassuming carriage. This particular transport did not bear his crest and it was the way he wanted it, for obvious reasons.

"Of course not," came her breathy reply.

"Or would you prefer it if my busy fingers and lips were stroking *you*?" He rose and went over to sit next to her, despite her protests. He inhaled sharply when their thighs touched. Bloody damn hell. How could he react this way when women held absolutely no sexual interest for him? Yet with her, everything about her seemed to scorch him. His heart hammered in his chest at the novel emotion.

"All you need do is ask, Tiffany. All you have to do is ask me once, that's all." He inhaled her subtle perfume. It drove him to distraction. "Once and only once. You want me, all of me, don't you? Say the word, Tiffany, say it. Submit to me."

"No."

"Say it."

"I won't. I can't."

"Say it. Please say it." He shook her lightly by the shoulders trying to make her see reason. He leaned toward her so that his warm breath intentionally skittered along the hollow of her graceful neck. "I know you felt what I felt—I know full well you did. Felt the world spinning,

the almost unbearable need. Didn't you? Now tell me what I need to hear. Say it."

"Yes. Yes, damn you. Yes...yes...yes. I felt it. Will you make love to me?"

His lips were on hers in a heartbeat.

* * * *

Trembling, Tiffany pressed her body against him, crushing her breasts against his lean, muscled chest. He angled his lips and kissed her, his tongue sliding into her mouth and touching hers, tentatively, hesitantly, at first, then more aggressively.

She tasted brandy, and it mingled with the subtle smell of his spicy cologne. As his hot tongue mated with hers, she swayed against his erection.

At the movement, he groaned into her mouth and slipped his hands and round her back to press their bodies closer. He nearly shook with aching need. And wondered for a split second if he should push her away. Once he had her body, there would never be any going back for him; of this, he was dead certain.

Instead, let out a helpless growl, and brought up his thumbs to trace the curve of her breasts, his fingertips brushed lightly over her hard peaks, before circling over the silk bodice of her gown in

soft, spirally movements.

He smiled faintly in satisfaction when he heard her gasp. Then he slid the top of the gown off her shoulders so he could toy with her naked breasts.

He licked first one nipple, then the other, rolling each around with his tongue. Then he parted his plush lips wide and stuffed her whole breast inside his mouth and sucked, while his tongue continued its assault against her nipple. When he let go her breast, he made a small popping sound.

"Do you like the way I suckle you?" he asked softly, almost uncertainly. "Do you like this too?" he questioned in earnest, his breath tickling her ear as he laved her earlobe, making her shiver and sending chills straight across her spine. "Or this, Tiffany?" He kissed along the side of her mouth, up and down her neck, suckled her neck.

"Oh damn, it all feels good," she murmured forcefully, in unladylike tones. "Terribly good."

He smiled slightly at the swear word. "I want to feel your heart pound as fast as mine, I want you to come as hard as me, as many times as me" he whispered. His large hand cupped and gently squeezed her other breast, his thumb and forefinger plucking her nipple as if were a ripe berry for the picking.

Tiffany shuddered and let her head drop back against the circle of his arms. Felt the entire insides

of her body turn into one puddle of arousal at the sensuousness of his every caress, of his every wicked, tantalizing word. She felt his wet mouth devour the entire circumference of her other breast as he flicked his tongue back and forth over the turgid nipple. It drove her crazy and her nipples tingled, hardening even more, if such a thing was possible.

"Thank God you wore no crinoline this night," Alex openly acknowledged in sort of a daze."

"Take off your dress. I want to you touch you, and I don't want the dress hindering me...us."

With the help of his frantic fingers, they did his bidding. The silk of her gown spilled over his powerful arms, brushing over her thighs and stockings, then he flung it on the opposite seat where it landed in a heap. Her stockings met the same fate. Naked except for her underwear, she sidled sideways onto his lap, gripping his biceps to steady herself. She could hear the pitter patter of his strong heart beat, feel his muscles coiled and defined against her fingers, feel his less-than-steady breath on her hair. And she sighed, rubbing her face in small circles against his chest. "Alex. I want you."

"You will have me—all of me." He lifted her up. "Take the underwear off too. I want you completely naked to my gaze." He didn't wait for her to comply this time, he took the waistband of

her underwear and ripped them off her body. He would stuff them in his bedroom dresser drawer later as his own private souvenir.

Tiffany let her hands stroke along his strong arms as his hands moved around her to cup and squeeze her breasts some more. "I'm so hot for you, I could actually ejaculate without even entering you...without even touching myself," he commented shakily, "and I have never, ever felt aroused enough with any woman, or man, to do that. Do you understand what I'm not telling you, Tiffany? Do you?"

Yes. You're telling me I'm the one. Now kiss me." She leaned into his kiss, begging for it and his touch. "You make me dizzy from your kisses," she whispered, "and I love it. Love it. Love it."

"There's more. So much more. Before you leave my coach tonight, every inch of your body will be thoroughly kissed. Do you understand that?"

"Yes. Yes, three times, yes."

He peeled off his gloves and tossed them on the other seat alongside her clothing, not caring where they landed. "Would you like to have a carriage ride with me you'll never ever forget?" His eyes closed for a moment at his own words and a soft sigh escaped. This whole thing shook his world, everything was new, all these new sensations of being with a woman who actually aroused him. The first aching need to mate with a woman. He

felt like a virgin. Then he opened them and fixed her with savage, ravenous look.

His grin became strained as he looked down at her crotch, really looked down there, for the first time. So feminine and smooth. She smelled like honeysuckle in the summertime down below. It made him swallow hard and his cock hardened another inch he knew he shouldn't have, stretching his taut skin to the limit.

"Then understand this, Tiffany Iverson, I intend to be your lover of all lovers. Understand something else; I am primed and aroused enough to eat a *permanent* path up and down that smooth flesh of yours, right before I pump the hell out of it."

She blushed a fiery red at his naughty, erotic words. "I want you to have whatever you want of me, from me."

His next few sentences comprised only two words. "Lift up. Turn around. Ass tilted. Ass spread. My way."

Eagerly, she did as he asked, hoping she got it right, but knowing he'd change her position in a heartbeat if she weren't in the position he wanted her. She felt so aroused herself she could feel the juices between her legs actually coat her thighs.

"Absolutely delicious," he murmured into the steamy confines of the large carriage. "Sweet Tiffany. Fuck time. Right now. Can't wait."

Settling his arm about her waist, he lifted her up. His arm bumped her naked cheeks when he opened the seams of his trousers, hot breath teasing her neck as he lowered her back onto his lap. His leaking, hot staff pressed against her bottom like a yellow-hot poker stick.

"You're so very warm. Oh, sweet heavens. Alex. You feel hot."

"Yes, 'oh sweet heavens' is right. You'll be on fire for me before I'm through...we'll both be on fire," his whispered softly in her ear. One hand slipped between her nether lips zooming in on her clit, while the other unerringly targeted her ass cheeks pushing them slightly apart. His fingertips lovingly brushed the outer rim of her anus. "I have never made love to a woman in this way. Sweet Jesus...what you do to do me...and it's only our first encounter. Only the first."

The gentle push of the tip of his penis into her derriere was strangely arousing yet different than anything she'd experienced before, and she hissed between her teeth at the extremely odd but pleasurable sensations.

"I am going to nestle all of my cock in the valley of your lovely bottom. I intend go inside you and thoroughly make myself at home there...that I can promise you." Pure desire overwhelmed the last vestiges of any uncertainty at him being a novice.

Her face flamed once more. His naked shaft

settled between her cheeks and she wriggled excitedly against him, drawing out a deep groan from him. She felt urgent desire—hot and wet moisture between her legs—and she rocked gently up and down on just the crown tip of his cock, heightening the deliciously needy sensation for more of him.

“Alex.” Tiffany felt another spurt of liquid arousal dribble between her legs and coat Alex’s head. It embarrassed and excited her at the same time. A sudden deep rut in the road sent her plunging down on him, all the way to his base, and she felt his balls brush against her bottom. She moaned at the feel of it all.

Instant shockwaves bounced against his scorching cock, drawing his sacs tight against her naked behind. “Jesus, Tiffany.” He heard her moan again, and his answering moan set them both on fire. They both sped up their movements. Alternating, he licked up and down her back, plucked at her clit, fingered and caressed her nipples. His mouth everywhere he could touch. Every turn and jostle of the carriage, every ditch and crevice in the uneven roads, sent them reeling in pumping pleasure. When another sudden pitch of the carriage jarred the grunting couple, it was enough to send them both spiraling into climax.

Deeply imbedded in her soaked back channel, he stilled his movements entirely and waited for

her to catch her breath. When she did, he began pumping her with renewed fervor. Their next climax was not long in coming. Alex jerked deep inside and let out a long, intense growl as he came and came inside a sweet ass that was already brimming with his cum.

When she felt one finger, then two, invade her vaginal opening, stroke her insides with loving care...Alex...filling her front door and her back door. Tiffany couldn't hold back a small groan of completion as she moved against him in a frenzied pattern, her cum drizzling over his cockhead. Over and over she continued to move against his hands and his still-rock-hard shaft even though she'd come twice already. *Unable to stop and not wanting to stop.* "Alex, can't stop. Can't. Alex...pump...me." And then finally, she let out a shout of pure ecstasy as the fire of passion overwhelmed her body and mind.

And Alex...all he could do was cry out in ecstasy with her, plunging into her dripping orifices repeatedly as the savage fire of passion nearly ate him alive.

Then Alexandre made love to her like a man insane.

He eased out of her luscious behind and drove into her tight, wet sheath. The fact that she'd only ever been intimate with him and Clifford, the fact that she lusted after him as much as he did her,

served only to propel him further into his insanity of need. At one point, he was lucid enough to stick his head out his carriage window and tell John, his trusted coachman, to drive around toward the other part of the countryside this time, to the other part of the world for all he cared, until he told him otherwise.

Well over an hour-and-a-half flew by. Again and again, he ejaculated into her welcoming inferno as he had in her bum. And still he couldn't get enough of her. The insanity of need swamped all rational thought but one. Making love to Tiffany. He continued to take her, eat her, drink her while he moaned repeatedly in agonized rapture. While she moaned in rapture.

He couldn't stop.

Neither could she.

Instead, the next time, they rode each other so hard—so frantically hard—it was a wonder the springs on his carriage hadn't broken loose in four different places.

Minutes ticked by without either of them speaking as they stared into each other's glazed, sweat-soaked faces. They had nearly sexed each other to total oblivion.

"Tiffany."

"Alexandre..." her voice completely failed her, she couldn't seem to utter another sound let alone a whole word. She cleared her parched throat

several times, and waited a second before trying to speak again. "I need to get home."

"No, don't go. Please, I need—I still need..." He took in a shuddering breath and tried to get control himself. He barely managed to do so. It was a miracle he did so at all.

"It's time, Alex."

"I know. I know you need to go."

Then he grabbed her again unable to help himself. This time when they made love, they kept their eyes open throughout, and he watched for the first time as her face lit in pure radiance, watched when her muscles contracted and she came all over him. He swore he saw the brilliance of tiny stars when he gazed upon her as she climaxed. *Hovering over them both.* It sent him instantly over the edge again.

An hour later, he kissed her lightly on the lips. "Tiff." Something beyond profound had happened to them in this very carriage. Magical. Oh, dear Lord, it had been magic. It was not supposed to be this way. He was going truly insane...he was seeing things, feeling things that couldn't possibly be, shouldn't be. It was never supposed to be like this, not with a woman. Not with her. "Tiff."

He swallowed the lump in his throat when he looked at her, his eyes helplessly following her movements while she rearranged her hair and

straightened her dress. *His mind for the first time in his life, in complete and utter chaos.*

"I have to go."

"I know," he repeated for the third time that night. "I know." Wordless, he watched her leave; watched her from the distance of his nameless black carriage as she safely entered her home. She glanced back his way only once and then closed the door with a soft click behind her.

"She is now inside with Clifford," he said so softly. "Gone."

Alex knew one thing for certain in that moment: He wouldn't get over Tiffany anytime soon— her or Clifford. The need between his legs had been soothed temporarily, but it would be only a short matter of time before he ached again. He sighed and then sharply inhaled the heady smell of her perfume and their lovemaking. Life, unfortunately, did not come with crystal balls. He'd had no way of knowing that meeting and falling for Clifford would ultimately lead him down the path to Tiffany.

Heaven help him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tiffany rose much later than usual the next morning. The sun already shone brightly through the curtained windows and as her customary habit, she padded on her slippers and whisked the curtains apart before her ladies maid entered her chambers. "It's beautiful outside today," she whispered. Hurriedly she began dressing without the help of her maid, Sara, one of her personal servants who came with her when she married the Viscount.

An instant later, Sara knocked, then let herself in. She hurried to assist her Ladyship with the buttons of her morning dress.

"My, my, Lady Rathbern, it's so unlike you to tarry this long in bed. If you do not hasten, you'll miss breakfast altogether," Sara replied, tsking.

"Yes, I know. I can't imagine what's come over me. Is the Viscount up and about this morning, or has he not yet returned from his man-of-affairs office?" She knew her husband wanted to discuss

his new research project with him. The two men were often of like minds on the subject of science and technology.

"Why, yes he is. He's reading the newspaper downstairs in the breakfast room." Sara approached the chair and dainty table where she always dressed her mistress's long waist-length hair and picked one of the brushes, but Tiffany forestalled her.

"Sara, that will be all today," said Tiffany, giving her devoted employee a quick smile, "I'll handle doing my own hair today, I think. You can have your way with it tomorrow."

"As you wish, milady." The middle-aged woman put down the brush and delicate hair clips she was about to use and smiled back at Tiffany before leaving the room.

Tiffany glanced up in the mirror and drew in an unsteady breath. Might as well face herself.

Last night she bedded a man in wanton abandon not her husband. In a carriage like some common floozy. An insatiable tart who allowed a man to have her body time and again.

She laid her head down on her folded arms and sat there for minutes on end just thinking about what happened and the state of her life in general. Each and every time she questioned herself, she came up with the same conclusion. She needed to be with Alexandre again like she needed air to

breathe. Drawing that conclusion, she quickly made her way downstairs.

Breakfast was often served in the cheery breakfast room, its tall numerous windows faced the morning sun as it streamed against the blue and white wall-covered room, when it deigned to show itself, that is, and cast a welcoming hue all over the room. A set of French doors led out onto a sandstone-colored terrace where colorful pots of flowers and small shrubs grew.

"Good morning," she said in moderate tones upon entering the room. Ravenous, she strolled to the side table positioned against the wall, and immediately helped herself to crumpets and honeyed butter, tomatoes, eggs and potatoes. A self-serve buffet because recently they preferred to take their morning meal without the aid of servants in the room. Just the two of them alone. Setting the plate adjacent to him, she pulled her chair out and sat down to feast.

"Good morning," she repeated more loudly a few minutes later.

The newspaper made a rustling sound as he folded it and laid it on the table away from them. He gave her a hard and lengthy stare.

"Mind telling me where you got that love mark you've been trying so diligently to hide from me, *wife?*"

Tension radiated from him with an abruptness that shocked. Only in the room for two minutes how could he tell—be that observant?

In the midst of pouring herself a glass of juice, Tiffany jumped at the shards of ice she heard in her husband's usually neutral voice. Her fork fell from her nerveless hands and clattered on the table with a thunk. "I—I burned myself trying to curl my own hair," she replied in a straightforward voice she prayed sounded convincing.

It didn't.

Even to her own ears she could hear the slight tremble of deceit in her words.

"Liar. You lying little baggage. You have a trained maid to do your hair!"

He rose from the dining table in one furious movement and loomed over her. "How is it that I, who've tried so hard not to mark you in our almost constant, frenetic love-making, so the viewing public doesn't comment on the marks I place upon my WIFE'S neck, now have them prominently displayed in my face, *by some other fucking man?*" His fingers tapped on the table next to her untouched glass of juice. Some of the contents sloshed out and splattered on the spotless table as well as the food she managed to eat a small portion of. She couldn't stomach eating more now anyway.

She gasped, more horrified and guilty than she'd ever been. And afraid. He was in a towering rage.

"What? No answer? Mouse got your tongue, Viscountess, because I certainly didn't have it or any other part of your body last night, *did I*? No wonder we didn't make love. You'd been thoroughly exhausted by someone else!"

* * * *

"What do you want me to say, milord? You've caught me." She folded her hands carefully in her lap so he wouldn't see them shaking. "The mark, though, is not prominently displayed at all," she managed to declare in self-defense.

He looked as though he wanted to throttle her until her teeth fell out.

"Get out of my sight, Tiffany."

She rose on trembling legs intent on exiting the room as quickly as she could before her irate husband was driven to do her bodily harm. Just as she reached the door and blessed escape, Clifford's question halted her in her tracks.

"Who was it? Was it my dear insulting friend, Alexandre?"

"He's more than a friend and we both know it."

"*Was,*" he coldly corrected her. "Was it Alexandre? Answer the simple question, please."

Silence.

"You'd better answer me, and if I were you, I'd really hesitate about telling me another untruth."

"Y – Yes. It was he."

"Did you know, Tiffany Iverson...that I'm deeply and very much in love with you? I am." He said the words so quietly, so softly.

His declaration gave her the thrills, chills, and the hots.

"You've never said..." she began before trailing off, a look of utter shock chasing over her flushed features.

He got up and moved rapidly to her side, his body movements as tight as an archery string. "I'm saying it now." He caressed the side of her neck where the vivid mark was hidden by a face powder mixture she'd concocted and a layer of lace. "Wait for me upstairs, wife."

His voice, though, held no warmth and only the promise of a reckoning when he gave her the order.

* * * *

The moment she left, no, *raced* out of the room appeared a more apt description, Clifford spun on his heel and tread briskly through his large imposing home. Tumultuous emotions barely on a leash. A-few-abruptly-worded-commands-to-his-

servants-later, found him in his carriage heading to his infamous ex-lover's home.

Wainhaven.

For the most part, Clifford considered himself an honorable man. Having an endless, unremitting relationship with a male lover, he knew, could never be deemed honorable—not in the least. In fact, it was a crime punishable by incarceration if one was convicted and judged. Thankfully, exceedingly few ever were. The last unfortunate sod found guilty of it, however, had been executed not more than twenty years ago. Nor could he worry himself sick about whether he would lose all his wife's affections over the powerful ones that surged through her and Alex when his back was turned. He certainly didn't intend to continue his improper affair with the man when he was married, now willingly so, and deeply in love with his wife. And so help him to the heavens above, neither would she.

Clifford exhaled and inhaled through his nose in one of his recent calming routines. If he didn't, he swear he'd go berserk on Alexandre and outright kill him or fuck him to death the moment he found him. Either way he'd be dead. Either way, he'd have Tiffany to himself.

* * * *

Without bothering to give the servant his coat and

hat, Clifford marched straight into Alexandre's favorite room. Clifford didn't spare a glance at the massive array of books, both new and old, gracing Alexandre's famed library. He was there to confront the man not read him a midmorning story. He found him standing quietly by the fire with his eyes closed and his head tilted back.

"Did you fuck my wife, Alex?"

* * * *

Alexandre's movements faltered when he whirled around to meet Clifford's fiery blue eyes. His grey eyes widened then narrowed on the man who'd haunted his thoughts during the day and who happened to be married to the very woman, the only woman on the face of the Earth, who controlled his every dream at night. How mired in complexity has become this tangled web. A woman that rocked the world beneath his feet the moment their lips touched and a man, the only one he'd genuinely wanted, were married to each other. What madness is this?

"Did you take liberties with my wife behind my back?"

It showed in Clifford's tense demeanor that he already knew the answer but wanted Alex to say it to his face. Tell him right to his face—if he had the guts.

"Why are you really here, Clifford? It's apparent from your expression and stance you already know the answer to your question. Don't bother calling me out. I won't duel with you except with my tongue. I hope that's clear to you. And you want to know something else? I'd have her over and over again if *she* would let me, whether you officially allowed it or not. I thought I was a man's man for the longest time. Until her. She's the only one, Cliff. I'd spend the rest of my days and nights making love to you both if *you* would let me."

"Don't speak to me of love and fidelity. You've never been faithful to any man you've ever toyed around with in your life! I don't believe anything you say."

"I'm in love with you, but I'm already deeply in love with her and she and I have only begun. There. You have the confession of a wretched man who can't seem to have the two things he wants more than anything else. Her...then you."

"You'll have neither of us, Wainhaven. There will be no three of us, or the *two* of you. This whole thing has gotten out of hand and it's time to reel it in. And since we're making confessions, let me tell you this: She is my wife and I'm over-the-top-of-my-head in love with her. He threw out another verbal barb, "She's been crazy about me for years, but then, you, so-called wise man that

you are, already knew that."

Alexandre gnashed his teeth. "And me? What does she feel for me? I'm in love with her too, dammit. Secondly, what do you feel for me, Clifford? Was it merely hot sex and nothing more?"

Clifford stared at him, then stared at that beautiful ultra-lush mouth. "Are you asking me if I remember all the things you can do sexually or the other things and times having nothing at all to do with sex?" A muscle ticked in his jaw. "I don't know what I feel for you."

"I think you very well do know. Was it more than sex?"

Clifford hesitated for a moment before answering. "Yes. It was more than sex."

Alexandre immediately intercepted the thoughts written clearly on Clifford's face. An unreadable expression skittered across his own. Clifford—a man usually so assured and unruffled, stood there in his face anything but unruffled. Ready to do battle with him in order to keep Tiffany away from him. His Tiffany. Something primal flowed through his veins and his groin began to harden. He tamped the need down.

"It was one thing to have an open liaison with me, one she was fully aware of, but now you want her as well. To consume her; consume her to the point she doesn't know her own mind *or* me."

Until there was little love or emotion left for him. "That, I will not allow."

A muscle ticked in Alexandre's jaw at the word 'allow'. He made no comment.

"Worse, you've been having her behind my back. How many times have you made love to her in subterfuge? Three times, four, five? More than that? You're a deceitful man, Alexandre. While you were making love to her you were smiling in my face."

"I've made love with her too many times to count," he taunted truthfully. Indeed, he wanted no misunderstanding.

"In my house too, Alex?" the Viscount's voice came out low and pained.

Alexandre was silent for a moment but decided on brutal honesty.

"No, in my house too. The loving is like a fire in my blood and I can't stop it," his expression turning wondrous and hungry, "or stop wanting it. I can stay away from you—if I must—but I will not stay away from her. *I will not...I cannot.*"

"Are you telling me you will continue to seek out my wife's affections, knowing I've warned you to desist?" He gave him a stunned, furious look. "Willfully encroach on territory which does not belong to you morally or legally?"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you. I desire her more than anything or anyone breathing on

this earth.”

“You sorry sonofabitch! You won’t be touching me or her.”

Enraged as never been before, Rathbern hauled off and attempted to clout his estranged lover with all his two hundred and twenty eight pound considerable might. If not for Alexandre’s swift movement sideways, the power behind that first attempted blow would have knocked him to the floor unconscious. Swinging his long muscular arms downward and up, Clifford dealt double uppercut blows to the underside of the younger man’s chin and cheek, following it with a left hook to the usurper’s right eye. This time, however, Alexandre wasn’t counting on the angle or the fury of the slightly taller man’s blows, and the triple strike knocked him to the ground with a sickening thud.

Alexandre growled like an angry bull, shot up and slammed Rathbern into the nearest wall. He turned slightly to the left, his right arm gaining momentum. Turning back around on the balls of his feet in a fisted roundhouse wallop, he connected with Rathbern’s jaw and then the side of his temple. He reared back to hit Clifford dead in the mouth intending to knock his teeth down his throat, subconsciously tempering the intensity of his blow with much less force only at the last possible second.

The strike still wracked havoc.

Blood splattered from Rathbern's mouth and nose. Weakly, he pushed Alexandre away, taking a number of steps in the direction of the doorway.

Alexandre immediately let down his guard. Rathbern was leaving.

In an unexpected move Alexandre would remember for the rest of his life, Clifford swung back around and like a trained weapon, leapt up in the air with his right leg bended at the knee like a prancing horse. His knee made direct contact with Alexandre's diaphragm. Bam!

As if in slow motion, Alex felt himself going backwards and hitting the floor once more, and for one brief moment he gasped desperately for breath and couldn't find it.

Somewhat weakened to begin with, the impact of his blow caused Clifford to lose some of his balance as well, and he struggled to stand on unsteady feet. Breathing harsh and painful, his lip cut in two different places, and a gash on his hairline, he bent over to look into Alexandre's battered face. Plastered on the floor, the younger man's eye was already starting to badly swell.

"I should hit you in the other eye to make it even. I might love you, Wainhaven," he whispered grimly, "but I love her a great deal more. She is my wife. Mine. Not yours. Not ours. And if need be, I'll kill you over her if I have to.

Stay the hell away from her."

Clifford limped to the door and banged it shut. There was the faint sound of muffled masculine voices for a short period and then silence.

Alexandre touched his aching jaw, his aching face, and probably what was an aching fractured upper rib and whispered back just as grimly. "I love you too. But I love her more...so very much more. Nothing will keep me from her, not your ties of marriage, not even broken and battered bones." *If you want me out of her bed and out of her life, you will have to kill me.*

* * * *

"Fancy meeting you here," Alexandre replied calmly two weeks later to the only man who'd punch him without him instantly retaliating. Bumping into him at one of several bookstores both men occasionally frequented was pure accident. Neither man would call it a stroke of fortuitous luck.

Unlike some of the other stores, this place, located in Cheltenham was large and cozy—though they appeared to be the only people inside at the moment—it housed row upon row of all manner of books imaginable on practically any topic. In addition, it had a small snack area with a several tables and chairs where one could sip tea

or coffee, homemade scones with butter and sweet pies. It was obviously a place only the upper-middle-class and the well-to-do came often to.

"Looking for me, Lord Rathbern?"

"Hardly. You can go straight to the devil for all I care." Abruptly, he scraped back the chair he'd languidly been sitting in, his apple pie only half eaten, stood up, then moved toward to door and out of it without breaking a single stride.

Alexandre, hardly finished saying his piece to him though, followed out behind him.

Clifford turned around. "Why are you following me? You're the last man in England I would have any inclination to see." Even as he spoke the words the unwanted pull of attraction tugged at him.

"You deceive yourself and your wife."

"I never deceived my wife. She knew what I was about before she rushed me down the aisle with blackmail and visions of glorious wealth. She knew I was in your pants and you in mine at the time. She also knows how I feel about her now—how much I love her and how much I want to fuck her—and believe me, I do." Clifford leaned toward him and spoke more softly for effect. "Every orifice, every chance I get."

Alexandre snarled deep in his throat at the snide admission and the gut-wrenching images it produced of his Tiffany making love without him.

How could she!

"Do not keep me from her, Clifford! I'm warning you, I can't bear it. I MUST be a part of her life. I must."

"No."

"Damn you. *I must*. What part of those two words can you not understand?" He took in a calming breath. Clifford's acceptance of the situation between him and Tiffany was paramount—for him and for her if the two of them were ever to have any semblance of a bearable relationship together. "I'd like to be a part of your life too, if you'd let me. So long as you know that it is *you* who links to us—Tiffany and I." He straightened the collar of his riding coat, his agitation clear, then spoke just as soft for emphasis. "Tell me something, Clifford. When it's just the two of you, when you're kissing her does the ground seem to stir around your feet...or under your body while you're deeply imbedded in her heat, madly pumping her to completion?"

"What the blazes are you talking about, Alex?" He glanced away and his eyes caught sight of a couple, a young man and woman, average in dress, talking animatedly away and smiling. He sighed and turned back to confront the hateful, beautiful face of his ex-lover and nemesis. "I felt nothing, *anything* like what just explained. Ever. You talk in riddles—as usual, these days." He lied

though, it showed in his demeanor.

"You truly are deceiving yourself." Alexandre knew he lied. It happened once—The man must have felt something, if only muted, along those very lines the only time all three of them had been involved in sex together. Had he felt it because he and Tiffany had been linked together through the hand-and-mouth ministrations she gave Clifford? He believed it to be true to the bottom of his tarnished soul, and deep, deep down, so did Clifford. Whereas Clifford shot to the stars every time he made love to his wife, Alex shot beyond them...and brought those stars back to hover over them. But Clifford was Tiffany's husband. Not him...

Alexandre gave him a wry, sad smile. "You think it never happened, do you? Well, it happens to me every single time I'm with her."

"Then that's too bad for you, now isn't it?" Clifford heaved in a tense breath and fought for the last visages of his self-control. "Stay away from me. And you sure as hell better stay away from her. Or I'll have the magistrate fine your ass in a court of law for dallying with my wife... faster than you can shout the name 'Rathbern'." Clifford swallowed, took one last look at the man he'd spent so much time with, turned on his heel and paced briskly onward.

Alexandre's equilibrium shattered like fine

china against a hard tiled floor. "Sorry, I can't do that!" he yelled the words at the top of his lungs and backed up against the darkened alcove of a neighboring shopkeeper's entryway. He drew in a shaky breath and rubbed his hands across his face back and forth.

The shopkeeper came out and upon shrewdly noticing the luxurious clothing and look of breeding in the man rubbing his hands over his face, inquired helpfully, "My Lord, are you all right? Might I be of some assistance?"

"No thank you, but you are very kind to offer," his tone polite. "I must be on my way. Perhaps some other time I might come back and have a look at the items you sell."

The middle-aged owner beamed at the thought of a future sale and politely shut the door leaving the gentleman to his meanderings. "Very good, sir."

Sliding back on his horse he pondered his life as he made the long trek—something he decided to do on the spur of the moment—to his solicitor's townhouse in the northern part of London. Long ago, he thought himself a complete homosexual while Clifford had been a healthy heterosexual—that is, until he'd made a move on him. But the blinding truth stared him in the face. He possessed absolutely no desire for women other than one. *Only one.*

The Viscountess Rathbern.

No other woman ever interested him in the past because he'd been born for one woman and one woman alone. Her. Along the road of life, not knowing what he knew now, restless and completely unfulfilled by the few women he bothered to take out—hell, he hadn't even been able to reach orgasm the only two times he'd tried sex with a woman—the same woman—at age eighteen. After that, he dabbled in male companionship, finding out early on he liked it much better, to the exclusion of any female trying deviously or otherwise to capture his interest and ultimately get inside his pants.

In reality he'd only been in need of one lone, single female.

When it came right down to it, he loved Tiffany more than he loved another human soul. More even, than he loved Clifford. He could endure without Clifford, if he must, but no way in the world could he endure this life without Tiffany.

My God....

It suddenly dawned on him in agonizing clarity. He, Earl of Wainhaven, a man of immense affluence and privilege, should've been the one to marry her. The other part of his soul.

How had a man as intelligent and quick-witted as he, been such a stupid fool?

CHAPTER EIGHT

"I'd like you to go to Cambridge with me," the Viscount said in persuasive tones.

"Cambridge? Whatever for? For how long? When?" She rattled the questions off without stopping for breath.

"I plan to be away for two days to attend a meeting in Cambridge. Specifically, I want to attend the unveiling of Mr. Isaac Singer's plans for what he calls the first practical sewing machine."

"No. Absolutely not."

"No?" He gave her a surprised look. "No?"

His boyish look of disappointment almost made her change her mind. Almost.

"No," she declared in firm tones.

"Fine then. I will not press you by pestering you again about it—may I ask why not?" he said, all in the same breath.

"The man is a libertine."

"Oh come now," he scuffed. "Surely you don't believe everything you hear or read in the papers?"

"In this instance, I do and I have."

"I'll say naught else on the matter. My lips are closed to the subject." He gave her a soft kiss on the cheek and deftly steered the conversation to other safer topics.

His lips did not remain closed, however.

Again, he asked her that afternoon and at dinner that evening and yet another time before they went to sleep. "Come with me. It'll be fun."

"No, Clifford, dear heart. You'll have to go this one alone, I'm afraid."

Tiffany kissed her husband good-bye before he left shortly after dawn two days later. Though her husband asked her several times to accompany him, she staunchly refused to go.

* * * *

After he left, she couldn't seem to fall back to sleep. She finally realized after an hour that any further sleep would elude her on this morning, so she got dressed, smoothed back her hair and twirled it into bun with a half dozen hairpins, then headed for a leisurely stroll in the garden. Her mind immediately turned toward her husband and the modern marvels of the day.

Foot powered sewing machines strong enough to sew even leather, telegraphs, trains, gas, and all manner of inventions and discoveries—it was indeed an exciting era! Unlike twenty-one years ago in 1830, when some poor, unfortunate French tailor, *Thimonnier*, was almost killed by an enraged group of tailors rioting his establishment. The throng burst into his garment factory and burned it down to the ground along with destroying all of his newly invented sewing machines, because they feared unemployment as a result of the invention. Brokenhearted, Mr. Thimonnier never bothered rebuilding his sewing machines again, or applying for any patent.

The incident, enough to make Tiffany stand in the middle of her garden in quiet reflection, also returned her thoughts to the flamboyant ex-actor, Singer. An alleged libertine and task-maker to his womenfolk, according to her cousin, Anna, Mr. Singer considered himself king of his domain and ruled like one. A hard-working provider for his family, or should one say, *families*, his wrathful tempers were not easily borne.

There'd be no out-spoken or enlightened women in his household! Her younger cousin in New York told her as much, knowing she would keep the information mainly to herself. A secret free-lance writer for the business section of a newly hatched city newspaper, Anna, going by the

stodgy pen name 'Mr. Eli Blanerhaus', was often in the know. Tiffany, aware that some men sought the sexual favors of street-mongers and illicitly kept mistresses, didn't have to approve it. She wouldn't personally attend *anything* having to do with that callous scoundrel, shrewd and mechanically brilliant, and amiable on the surface though he might be! Instead, she'd decided to go to a rout being given by one of the landed gentry in Gloucester the following day.

The next afternoon, Tiffany spotted Alexandre at the same moment he spotted her.

She bit back the grin surfacing to her lips. *Never in public*, she chastised herself and wiped the besotted smile off her face. Did he know she would be here? She hadn't told him of it for she'd just decided to go at the last minute only yesterday. Determined, she turned her eyes back to the charming young man, about three and twenty, who stood in front of her talking animatedly about artifacts and the faraway land of Egypt.

Despite the interesting topic of the conversation, she found her eyes straying yet again in Lord Wainhaven's direction.

Something flickered in his striking grey eyes and just as she thought she'd concluded what that something was, he lowered his eyes.

Jealousy.

This time the jealousy wasn't directed at her, but because of her, because she was in the presence of a charming man who happened to be making her smile and laugh. She must be wrong on that score. Wasn't she? He knew how she felt about him.

Sexy beyond reason, Alexandre walked towards her with long, easy strides. "May I join in the discussion?" he interjected with an easy smile. "By the way, I believe your aunt was asking about you a moment ago," he stated, looking at the young man.

"Best go see what she needs, then. A joy talking with you, Lady Rathbern, as always."

Alexandre waited until the man was out of earshot. "Yes, a joy talking to you, Lady Rathbern...always," Alexandre said softly, for her ears alone.

"Did his aunt really want to see him?" She arched an eyebrow in skepticism.

"I haven't the faintest idea," he replied baldly. "I didn't care for the way his adoring gaze strayed from your beautiful brown eyes, to your lips, to your cleavage. It reminds me too much of my own gaze." Then he ended up doing the same thing he the young buck did five seconds ago. His gaze fixed on her cleavage.

"I do look at you adoringly," he whispered in a thick voice, "don't I?"

* * * *

A heartbeat later, those beautiful brown eyes of hers lifted and met his. The naked and unadulterated lust he saw reflected there made him want to take her upstairs to one of the guestrooms and ravish her until she panted with exhaustion from it. He made a single move toward her to act on his lust, and stopped inches from her gowned body. He clenched his hands at his sides to restrain himself from grabbing her.

"If you only knew how badly I want you right now," he growled, "you would undress in front of me and let me have at you with everyone watching."

Her breath hitched in her throat as she took in a loud, sharp intake of air.

"Does heat sweep through you in torrents at my crude, scandalous words, Lady Rathbern?"

"Might I remind you that we are in a public place? Sir, you forget yourself."

"Don't you 'Sir' me," he countered softly. "I said exactly what I meant," his eyes lingered over her bosom, before giving her a chaste bow, "and I most definitely meant what I said." His next words were so soft she never heard them. "And if I'd been a wise intuitive man, you would have been my wife."

Her very nearness intoxicated him. His heart

accelerated while he breathed in her delicate scent. But when she pushed away from him as though burned, he coiled in tension. "No doubt you step back, away from me, to allow yourself room to breathe. Do I make you breathless, Tiffany?"

Unable to resist, her eyes lowered and she stared right at his crotch where they stayed glued for several seconds. Horrified at her unseemly behavior, she looked away. "Good evening, Lord Wainhaven. What a splendid turnout, don't you agree?"

Not pleased by her stiff formality while her greedy eyes were all but undressing him, he decided to give her tit for tat. He got out a quizzing glass he'd yet ever to use and made a show of looking around the room. "I do believe you're quite right. I trust you are enjoying yourself, Viscountess. The weather should be quite nice tomorrow for the Duke's outdoor activities. Will you and your husband be attending?" he said in the same formal tones she used.

Suddenly tongue-tied, she could only stare up at him for several interminable seconds as if she star-struck. "No, we won't be necessary. I meant—that is to say—no—we won't be *attending*. We have prior engagements for tomorrow."

"Mind telling me what they are," he muttered beneath his breath.

"Excuse me?" She waited expectantly for him to clarify his statement. "I didn't hear you."

"I said, I would like to be among the first to say how charming you look today." Then he smiled knowingly when he caught her errant gaze looking between his legs a third time.

"T – Thank you."

Unexpected images of her sprawled on his bed, his head between her widely spread legs licking her as she moaned out her orgasm, shot through his shameless mind. His stomach tightened into knots and knew she must be thinking the same rampant thoughts when she paled and licked her glistening lips.

His avid gaze followed the movement of her tongue. Then his eyes fastened on hers.

Involuntarily she tensed at the intent watchfulness of his gaze.

"I hope you enjoy the rest of your afternoon, Lord Wainhaven." With those words ringing in his ears, she whirled away in search of less dangerous companionship.

* * * *

Two hours later, Tiffany developed a tension headache that seemed to split her head in two, and decided to call it a day. With purposeful strides, she went in search of her hostess, Lady Felicity

and her affianced. Finding the two playing archery with a group of thirty or so individuals, she quietly pulled the attractive, auburn-haired woman aside.

"Felicity, I want to thank you for inviting me to such a lovely outing, but I fear my poor head is splitting in two and I must take my leave," she said, her tone apologetic.

"Oh, of course," replied Lady Felicity in sympathy. "I'll see you later on this week and we can have afternoon tea."

"That would be lovely." Then she requested her carriage be brought round. Once comfortably ensconced, her coachmen, with a light flick of their whip, steered the team of horses swiftly toward the Rathbern estate.

She opened the door to her bedchambers, and blessedly went into the silence, locking the door firmly behind her. "My goodness, what a day," she muttered. Somehow, Alex found out and had attended that rout, and he...all thoughts halted abruptly and her body recoiled in sudden fear.

A shadow lurked in her dressing room.

The glow of the light's illumination set off a menacing cast to the darkest corner of the room.

Merciful heavens! Was she about to be robbed again, or worse?

Tiffany tensed and picked up the nearest thing to her—her husband's walking stick, ready to

meet the villain head-on. She held onto the object with both hands as her arms arced up prepared to swing it with her strength. Gasping when she saw who'd stolen into her private dressing area, she slowly put the makeshift weapon away. "Alex," she breathed softly.

"It took you long enough to get here. I left the rout an hour-and-fifteen minutes ago. I've been waiting here ever since."

"You seem to be developing a habit of waylaying me."

"I couldn't stay away." He let out a breath filled with self-confusion and longing. "I tried, God knows I did...but I couldn't." He took the pins out of hair and used the tumbling locks to pull her closer to him. "You have the strangest intoxicating effect on me."

"Alex, please, this can't go on—"

"Shsshh. Don't talk. Don't agonize. Just feel. *Feel me and you. Together.*" He spun her around to face him, brushing kisses over her forehead, her cheeks, the tip of her nose, and her chin. He couldn't stop there. His face caressed hers, his hands stroked her back, and he inhaled the scent of her perfume. "Just *feel*, sweetheart."

Like a kitten, Tiffany cuddled closer, silently encouraging more of his kisses, his caresses, more of anything he cared to do to her. *She was a fool. No she wasn't. Yes, she was...no, no, no, she wasn't...she*

wasn't. She most definitely *was*. Convulsively, her fingertips teased over his shoulders and back, moving lower. Much lower. Closing her eyes, she opened his trousers and slid her hand inside. Caressing his erect member, she let her senses absorb the swirling sensations stroking him built inside her.

He began to gyrate against her energetic hand. A hand busy in exquisite motion.

"Don't end us—don't end this." His hand locked on her other one and brought it to his lips. He kissed each finger, then her wrist, and then worked his way up her arm with flicks of his tongue. "Have to be near you, touching you, be inside of you, Tiff. Have to."

"I want that desperately too," she moaned back, contradicting herself. Slowly she removed her hand from his pants. Though his embrace was tight, she trembled badly from the effect he was having on her. "I need you inside me...all over me...everywhere. I can't stand this constant ache. Take me. This minute."

"Sweet heaven help me. Whatever this feeling is, it's more than love. I feel far more than what that simple term implies. I can't even describe it, Tiff. It's indescribable." He licked at her nipples through her clothing, leaving a hot moist trail in his wake. He unfastened the top of her gown, his nimble fingers clamoring to get to her hard

nipples and tease them, then suck. "Ahhhh, what you do to me."

"Hurry, Alex. Take them in your mouth."

"I want to suck everything, suck it all...everywhere. And so help me, I will."

Their surroundings were quickly forgotten. Everything. Forgotten. Especially the reasons they'd each come up with for denying this endless, burning passion. The passion took over and all rational thought flickered and then finally went out altogether.

* * * *

Looking at her friends, Tiffany groaned audibly at the turn of the conversation several evenings later. She didn't bother trying to join in the lively argument that ensued in the confines of her spacious carriage on whether the Marquess of Stanton would ask for the Countess, Lady Sylvia's hand or the lovely but penniless Miss Lilly Hurston's. She had other things on her mind. She turned back to the window, not caring one way or the other *who* Lord Stanton married.

Lady Charlotte, however, sat back, seemingly satisfied with having the last word on the subject while Lady Felicity's cousin, merely chuckled.

In fact, Tiffany remained silent for the rest of

the journey to the Hillshire manor where all three women received invites for dinner and a music recital. Occasionally her friends would cast a questioning glance her way, but respectful of her mood, they left her to her thoughts.

If they'd asked her what was on her mind at that moment, she could not give them a straight answer even if she wanted to be honest—which she did not. Her thoughts were in such a tangle she couldn't unravel them should she be inclined to try. All she does know with any clarity is that Alex is extremely hazardous to her peace of mind. She should do exactly what any sensible, well-bred lady in her position would do under the circumstances — *keep far, far away from him.*

* * * *

The manor appeared ablaze in gaslights when they finally neared the large, impressive structure made of three different types of beige stone. Why shouldn't it be ablaze when James Hillshire owned a stake in the Westminster Gas-Light & Coke Company located on both Cannon Row *and* Orchard Street?

When the three women arrived late on their hostess' steps well after the appointed time of seven o'clock, they were quickly ushered inside the grand entrance where no less than three tables

of varying heights lined each side of the wall, all burgeoning with white or black marble antiques, medallions, and vases of flowers. No spot on any of the tables, it seemed, left bare. They were then ushered past the drawing room, the family's extensive gallery, and directly into the Hillshire's formal dining room.

Having been here on several occasions in the past, Tiffany only gave a cursory glance at the opulent room with its silk golden-striped wall covering, ornately fringed chandelier, and spotlessly polished marble floors. The oblong dining table she prepared to take a seat at looked large enough to seat a good fifty people easily. Including the long-stemmed, decorated drinking glasses, there must have been two hundred pieces of dinnerware laid out for all twenty-five guests.

Suddenly she inhaled so sharply she thought for certain everyone at the table must have heard it. Lifting up her fan, she forced a delicate cough out of her mouth in an attempt to cover up the sound.

Seated not more than six places down to the right of her was none other than the Earl of Wainhaven. He looked splendid in black pants, white linen shirt, and black and charcoal silk cravat tied about his neck. The look, complemented by a pristine charcoal colored waistcoat and jacket, fit his strapping form to

perfection. In a word, he looked edible.

Alexandre chose that moment to look to his left. Immediately, gray eyes locked on hers for the briefest of moments. But in that fleeting space of time, she saw raw heat emanating from his eyes to hers.

Then it was gone.

He inclined his head in her direction and the corner of his mouth lifted in an enigmatic smile. He turned back around and stared unseeingly at his silverware. Slowly he lifted his glass of sherry from the table and took several sips of the fortifying Spanish wine, then dug into his first course of soup *ala Reine* and slivers of salmon Genevese. Seconds later, a woman on his right began engaging him in conversation. He tilted his head respectfully toward the elderly woman as if he were interested in everything she possibly had to say.

Vexed and disconcerted, Tiffany's head snapped to her own glass of wine. From that smile alone, she knew what he knew: He had purposely gotten himself invited to what he considered would be a boring, barely tolerable event knowing full well she would be here.

* * * *

"Do you feel crazy from it, the way we are

together?" Alexandre asked in low tones, waylaying her yet again after the evening's interminable affair had ended and she made the journey back home—blessedly alone—in her carriage. Her two friends were traveling back with other people on the morrow. He simply rode up in his carriage beside hers, approached her coachman, and in a calm, professional manner requested a brief word with his friend's wife.

Once inside, though, his voice became ardent. He did not touch her. He dare not touch her. If he did, they would assuredly make wild love.

"Does being together make you so crazy from it, your mind reels from the dizzying speed of your emotions and feelings? Until you're almost faint from it? Every time we make love, Tiff, it's like a new journey." Alexandre wanted her to say it out loud—verbally express this feeling between them. His eyes were wide open. He knew the truth. Did she?

Emotion flared in her expressive eyes. Passion, adoration, guilt...and shame. "I'd be lying if I said there wasn't something special between us. There is. Something unexplainable and very special. Addictive. I want to be with you and I love you. But I remain on pins and needles with this sneaky affair. Not only must we keep it secret from society, but we must keep it secret from my husband as well." Her voice faltered and she

looked down at her scrunched hands and then back up. Tears shone in her eyes. "I love my husband, Alex, I do. Oh, not in the same soul-shattering way I love you, but I do love and respect him tremendously."

He blew out a long, frustrated breath. "I did not risk getting caught by your irate husband who may take it upon himself to greet your carriage at any time, so you could tell me how much you love and respect him. Dammit, you were destined to fill in all the parts and voids that have been missing in every woman I've ever met." He gripped her shoulders, despite his better judgment not to touch her, his eyes blazed with an unquestionable certainty. "*You were destined to be my Countess.*"

*My God...*they both thought in unison at the truth of those words.

He needed to leave. *Now.* Before he rode her senseless again in her husband's coach. A good deal less calm than when he entered, he rapped on the door and got out.

Alexandre stood there on the side of the dust-hewn road, the giant maples overhanging with their green-leafed branches, wisps of fading evening light brushing against his hair. And his eyes...were glued to her moving coach until it became just a speck in the distance.

As always, intense flickers of emotion—or *something*—bounced from Tiffany to him, he ruminated on a grim note. Rapid fire, like the blink of an eye.

Or a bee sting.

At one time it had been an unpleasant sensation, almost painful. It had always been this way whenever he drew near her. He hadn't like it at the time, not at all. It was one of the reasons—that and the fact they'd taken a dislike to each other on sight—why he'd made it his business to see that their paths rarely crossed. Now he craved the feeling.

All it would have taken was being embedded deep inside her, just one time, and he would have known. Now...now he understood what those lightening brief flickers meant. He thought it'd been nothing more than zaps of pure animosity slinging back and forth between them. He'd been wrong. Such molten chemistry, he thought, swallowing hard. A bonding like no other. And now she would never be free to be his wife.

Fate had been unkind, and he, an idiot. She'd been right under his nose ripe for his plucking for years. Years! He wanted to shriek to the ceiling rafters at his ignorance and never stop shrieking until insanity drowned him into unconsciousness. He'd passed by this woman at least three dozen times not knowing, or trying to know, what he'd

been brushing so hurriedly past. He clearly understood today, though, that he'd been stalking by the only woman he could ever love, the only female who would ever sexually excite him.

Worse still, Rathbern wouldn't see or be with him, nor would the stubborn and startlingly possessive man willingly allow him within a yard of Tiffany.

Damn. He couldn't see either of them, the only two people in the world who meant anything to him. Past encounters with others had meant little to him, current and future ones, even less.

Hell below was surely laughing at his plight.

These thoughts swirling madly through his mind like some knotted spider web, the Earl of Wainhaven, one of the most sought-after bachelors for hundreds of miles in any direction, choked back a mighty roar of frustration.

CHAPTER NINE

“You’ve become a blackguarded burglar and thief, the way you slip in and out of this house at your will and take what you want.”

“The only thing I’m slipping in here for is you, Lady Tiff.”

“I know. I love you,” she confessed out loud for the first time, her voice little more than a broken whisper. “I’m in love with you both, but in different degrees. And before you say it, I already know with a certainty that humbles me, I’m the love of your life, Alexandre Luc DuPraden.”

Alexandre’s eyes smoldered like two twin gray fires at her words. “I must confess,” he whispered above his own galloping heartbeat, “you are correct. You are the love of my life, and I will not allow you to escape out of it.”

His mouth gently brushed over hers and she responded instantaneously. He growled in response, burying his fingers in her hair. Hot pleasure stabbed at her insides and she shuddered. She placed her arms around him and

pushed herself against him while he continued to plant one impatient kiss on her lips after another. "I could eat at your delectable mouth forever – do you already know that too?"

Alexandre wrenched her down the length of the bed, pushed her gown up about her waist and spread her thighs wide. "Naughty Tiff. You're not wearing any bloomers. For shame, for shame." Hot breath scorched her mons and his tongue stroked a sinuous path between her dusky pink folds. He slowly rolled his tongue over her taut clit, up and down, persistent in his strokes. He wanted her moaning out his name. *His* name.

Heat curled through Tiffany, searing every nerve ending in her body. Sadness turned to utter rapture and she thrust up against his mouth, crying out a wordless sound.

His hot mouth lathed her agonizing flesh thoroughly. Relentlessly.

'Yes, that's it. Let go. I want you to break apart in my mouth. Will you do that for me? Trust in these emotions between us and let go.'

"Yes-yes-yes. Mercy, yes. I'm letting go right now." A shattering orgasm shot through her and she arched up to meet her tormentor's frenzied mouth, the bed sheets crumpling in her tightly balled hands. A whimper tore from her lips. "Alex. Alex."

Struggling to catch her breath, she stared at the

man, the soft moonlight casting a shadowy reflection on his sensuous features, his slender nose, his full lips, his exotic grey eyes—the very man who threatened her marriage.

“Do the feelings we share frighten you?”

His sudden question startled her. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“We have control over one another’s bodies and emotions, Tiff,” he murmured near her ear. “Does that frighten you at all?”

“Yes,” she said, trying to stifle a sob of distress. “Yes it does.”

“I feel the same way about it too. It frightens the hell out of me sometimes,” he returned.

He pulled her gown over her head and with a soft whisper, it landed on the blue and burgundy hand-designed rug. “I find you utterly irresistible. I find myself needing your nearness, your body, your company more and more. You make me incoherent with thoughts of us...it’s nearly driving me mad.”

She could only nod breathlessly as he expertly rolled her nipples between his thumb and forefinger until they were hard peaks. They tingled unbearably and she moaned, unable to do much else. “I am a slave to your passion, Alex.”

“Do you realize who’s in control now?” His words sounded hoarse, though he tried to chuckle. His hand moved down to stroke the moistness

between her thighs. "Do you, Tiff?"

"That's only because I allow you to be," Tiffany said brazenly, "in control."

"You know you're playing with fire, my sweet." Alexandre rolled her over, roughly putting her on all fours. Taking direct control of her. He rubbed her dripping juices from the slit of her pussy to her puckered anus. "You're dripping all over my hand, you're so wet." Then he gently unfastened his pants and pushed his hard shaft forward, penetrating her from behind. "For the moment, sweet tart, I'm in control."

Dark magic zipped along nerve-endings they never knew they possessed, and his cry at the intense pleasure of it mingled with hers.

"We're in control," she managed to correct before another plunge of his cock cause her to cry out a very unladylike oath. She lifted up to meet his next thrust. "Maybe I'm really the one who's in control of *you*."

"The way I'm feeling right now, maybe you are." He slid in and out, out and in, shuddering at how perfectly in synch they were. "This is scary. Pleasure is too intense. Almost painful, Tiff," he gritted hoarsely. He gripped her hips and slowly pushed his hot erection in her to the hilt.

"Tell me you don't want this and I'll stop," he growled against her ear.

Tiffany caught her breath. "No! You know I

want it – and you.”

“Convince me,” he demanded thickly.

“I don’t want it to stop. I’ll kill you with my bare hands if you stop. Does that convince you?”

He didn’t reply – couldn’t reply – he only growled in his throat. The force of his dogged thrusts propelled her forward. It was answer enough.

Every time he drew back and pushed inside her, she encouraged him onward, feeling deliciously stretched to unbearable heights. “Do you know I swear I can feel you stretching me, caressing me all the way to my womb? Incredible.”

“Something’s happening between us every time I move in you...am inside of you. Touching you. Tiff...” his voice trailed off for long moments, but when he spoke, his words were choppy. “Unusual. Strange. So wonderful...not of this world.”

“I know, don’t think I don’t. Soooo hot it burns.” Tiffany gripped the edge of the bedposts for support and pounded into him. Past caring, she closed her eyes and enjoyed the sensations overtaking her body. “Please. I don’t want this feeling to end.”

He deliberately slowed his movements. “Shall I make love to you for hours?” his voice ragged now against her neck. Gradually he withdrew

only to fill her up again.

"Tiff, I could stay inside you forever."

She bit her lip, suppressing a loud cry. "I could do this with you forever, too." Her flesh stretched as his length slid smooth and deep, probing, filling her.

Her muscles contracted sharply around his thickness, both cried out, and when she felt the first wave of release slam into her, Alex, with a soft hiss, began to spill his seed deep inside her womb. Emotion overwhelmed them in their shared climax.

He took her in his arms and held her tightly to his chest not wanting to let her go. He didn't open his eyes and therefore missed the faint shimmering glow surrounding their tightly embraced bodies.

Eyes closed, he muttered into her hair, the words spilling forth from every corner of his soul. "I love you so much, and I—I don't know, I don't know, *I don't know...know...know* what to do about it. Please, God in heaven, somebody, *anybody* tell me what to do," his voice, an anguished, barely heard thread of sound bounced off the walls of the luxurious bedchamber.

CHAPTER TEN

Alexandre stood on the Iverson's doorstep, a far cry from his usual dapper and impeccably dressed visage the next morning, with the full knowledge the Viscount wouldn't be home. If he was surprised when Tiffany opened her own door rather than one of the servants, he hid it.

Shameless, he used her husband's occasional leaves of absence for his own nefarious purposes. He'd been informed that Rathbern was out of town for two days, visiting Isaac Singer, the American inventor of the household foot-powered sewing machine. Its innovative features actually included continuous and curved stitching—foot-powered—that impressed even him! The outspoken ex-actor believed the well-spread use of installment credit plans for the average household would significantly increase the sales of his products one day. Alex and Cliff had cautiously concurred. It would either make Mr. Singer a wealthy man or send him straight into bankruptcy

court.

Singer took Alex aside a while back, his eyes gleaming in his craggy, bearded face, and pointblank contended with every ounce of self-assurance he possessed that one day his company would be the largest manufacturer of sewing machines in the world. Despite the man's legal embroilment with a Mr. Elias Howe, Cliff and Alex believed him at the time. If impressed, which Alexandre knew Cliff would be—given the man's obsession with anything on the cutting edge—the Viscount would likely buy a number of them when they were produced. Mr. Singer's personal life, not exemplary by any stretch, one did their best to ignore. Alexandre was not interested in investing in sewing machines, in any case; he had other large business irons in the fire, like telegraphs, to pursue. The sound of Tiffany's voice broke into his thoughts.

"Alex! It's a surprise to see you today." She strove to keep her breathless agitation at bay.

"I couldn't sleep last night," he blurted in his delicious, masculine voice. "Go out with me, Tiff. Today. Now." He was prepared to ask, cajole, and plead if necessary.

"Go out with me in broad daylight. Today."

She placed a hand on the side of her temple. "What will people think?" She quickly ushered him in, and looked nervously about the room for

anyone who might overhear their damning conversation.

"Just this once. Spend time with me as any ordinary couple would."

"There's nothing *ordinary* about us."

"I know," he muttered softly, "nothing is ordinary about us. Extraordinary is more accurate." He touched her arm, reeling against the warm tingle that shot up his arm on contact. *Christ. He wanted to undress her and make love to her right here in her husband's foyer.* "We can take the train to London. It's faster. I'll be sure we have a private car to ourselves." Wealthy as he was, he could afford to do anything he liked.

"Where will we go? What do you have in mind?"

"I thought we'd go to Hyde Park in London to see The Great Exhibition in Crystal Palace—unless you want to say forget it, allow me to carry you away to my place and let me have my way with you," he said in a teasing voice.

His eyes, though, were hot and hungry as they roved over the green high-neck cambric morning dress she wore. Today, she wore her long hair secured with a pretty white bow. He closed his eyes for a second and imagined what lay underneath all those garments she wore. Remembering where that long hair of hers had been, and how she used it to touch every square

inch of his body. He let out a noisy exhalation.

"Have you thought about what will happen if someone sees us together and notices you? The place opens first thing in the morning. But who knows what people might be found strolling about the displays? Though I may not yet be, you are fairly well-known among the ton, Alex." Trying to be practical about this, it was extremely difficult when she saw the naked expressions on his face. "My reputation, something I hold important, could lie shredded in ruins if this gets out. We will always have to be careful just as you and Cliff are—or were."

He stiffened at the mention of his former companion, the splendid lover he had not had in some time. He missed that a little. Endure it he could and would. He could not, however, endure being without Tiffany. Quiet-spoken and grave, he looked at her worried expression, and made his next reply.

"I know, Lady Tiff, I know. I take responsibility for us. As I will always do," he murmured, taking his index finger and gliding it along the side of her jaw. "But it is quite early yet, and neither the Ton nor anyone else who matters, will be up and about attending the Exhibition on a gloomy, rainy Tuesday in September at half past eleven in the morning."

It was worth the risk. The Season over shortly

after the first week in August, some of the ton were already retiring to the country and most had seen the six-month event a dozen times or more since it opened. "That should be about the time we'll arrive at this palace of glass if you would but consent to go out. *Will you come out with me? Say 'yes'.*"

* * * *

Acquiescing, she gave him a faint smile. Inwardly, she was as excited as a thirteen-year-old-girl about going to such a fun, extensive event with Alex, the likes of which she'd seen a single time with her parents. She'd heard plenty about the *Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations* since that time and knew it was touted as the first international exhibition on manufactured products of its kind. The first great world's fair, a showcase of technology and manufacturing from countries all over the world! She had wanted to go again weeks and weeks ago after it opened on May 1st. She remembered the excursion distinctly because it'd been such an overwhelming experience. The first time had been May 5th during its opening week when the high entrance fees of one pound per person had barred all but the upper middle class and higher echelons from attending.

New things that should have arrived before the

doors opened on May 1st still seemed to be arriving—in a most untimely fashion—on a regular basis. Who knew for sure why some of the exhibitors had procrastinated so long? But with one thing and another, her sudden and tumultuous marriage, Clifford's grueling work schedules that left no time for them to do anything as a couple—done purposely at first to avoid her, she knew—she hadn't bothered attending but the one time. Now that Alexandre intended to escort her, she could barely contain her eager anticipation. The building housing the huge extravaganza was actually made out of sparkling glass and iron! Tons of it. Its structure consisted of nine hundred thousand pieces of glass and four thousand pounds of iron. It was wondrous. Amazing!

"Let me get my wrap," responded Tiffany, *and let me try to locate the largest, most concealing bonnet I can find to hide my face.*

Alexandre's face lit up when Tiffany approached him a scant few minutes later wearing a lightweight shawl and large bonnet.

He took them another route from the one he'd initially planned. Drove, instead, past the lush countryside towns of Cirencester, Cheltenham, and Bath. Finally, he slowed the unmarked carriage he used whenever incognito with Tiffany as he approached a small village called Avebury,

located in the county of Wiltshire. Nimble jumping out the carriage onto the ground, he sprinted around to help her out.

Bewildered she looked at her surroundings and then at him. "Why have we stopped here, Alex? There is nothing of import or interest here, I don't think, except some old, smallish boulders across the way."

"It's more than that," he stated with conviction. Gently he led her to a pile of huge, heavy stones, some appearing to weigh several tons in fact. If one bothered to pay attention, there were quite a number of stones that formed a very large coarse-looking circle surrounded by a henge. There were four distinct entrances-cum-exits within the circle.

Alexandre stared at her for a moment then off into the distance as if lost in thought. Finally, he spoke in a low, reverent tone.

"Tiffany, I am drawn to this place. Over and over I come here as though it were some kind of magnet and, I, helpless to resist its force. Sometimes I arrived here and stand in the middle of this vast circle with my hands raised up toward the morning sun and my face lifted to the sky. I know not why, or what it is that draws me to this area, to this sleepy little town. But I find myself, often on horseback, riding quickly through it, at least several times a month." He continued on in a soft voice as if afraid of being overheard by even

the birds flying overhead above him.

"Something draws me, something other-worldly, something irresistible, just as my love draws me to you and the love I feel for you is equally irresistible to me. I come here, as I come to you."

"Have you spoken about this to anyone else?"

"Heavens no. They'd think me going mad or some such—would have promptly made a place for me in bedlam years ago." He paused, seemed about to open his mouth to say something else. He shook his head as though changing his mind and began to speak. "There is a similar formation in the Plains area of Salisbury—the area called *Stonehenge*. Although I feel a sense of camaraderie and closeness with that area as well, it is unlike the strong feelings, the bond, I have when I come here."

How long has this area been special—how long has it called to you?"

"Since I reached my twelfth birthday." He bent down and plucked up a strand of yellowish-green grass, eying it thoughtfully before toying with it. "My mother died the same year."

"I know your father passed away when you were just a young child. Did your mother have help from a relative?" She looked at him apologetically. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to pry. You never speak of your family."

She glanced at him, her concern and love for him mirrored in her expressive brown eyes. "I feel so blessed at times to have my parents close at hand when I need them or want to converse about anything that troubles me. It must be extremely difficult not to have him to talk with—to share things. "

"But now I have you, Tiff."

"Yes. You do."

"You're right; it is difficult not having him to talk to as much as it is never having known him. My uncle—my mother's younger brother and only sibling—helped raise me until I reached my majority at age eighteen. He doesn't get around as he once did, what with his poor sight and stiff limbs." Needing to touch her, he grabbed her hand and gave it a light squeeze before letting go. "I'd like you to meet him one day soon though we'll have to travel to London to do so—he resides there for most of the year. Claims he likes it better there than his other home in the southwest part of the country."

He turned his head in her direction once more and gave her a look of earnestness. There could be no mistaking the affection he felt for his mother's brother. It colored every nuance of his voice.

"My uncle was a good and considerate man to me and my mother, and still is. He has a comfortable estate in Exeter. Do you know of the

area?"

Tiffany shook her head. "I have heard of it, it lays somewhere between Weymouth and Plymouth, but, no, I have never been there. Frankly, I have never traveled further south than Bath, I'm afraid." She gave him another apologetic look. "I would like very much to meet him."

She strolled by his side around the circular area of uneven textured stones in companionable silence for a few moments. Watched while he touched a stone here and a stone there, as bewilderment and something else indefinable came and went across his sculpted features.

"The picture in your library lets me know you are very like your father. He is a strikingly handsome man. Do you have any idea what he died from?"

His silvery grey eyes held a far-away look. "No, I do not. To look at me is to look at him. I'm the spitting image of my father," he sighed. "At three years of age my father died, leaving my mother grief-stricken when he departed this earth of the living. Clifford and I have that in common. We both lost our fathers at a far too young an age and neither of our mothers ever remarried."

"Clifford's mother is still quite lovely and fit. Who knows? She may yet remarry."

"True, but I rather doubt it."

Alexandre paused for a moment before

continuing his train of thought. "Sadly enough, I have no recollection of my sire. I think my mother died eventually of a broken heart when I was still a boy...she loved him deeply. As a young lad, I have a memory of her sobbing uncontrollably, saying, 'He's gone from us. Gone. How can I continue to bear it?' Alexandre inhaled sharply at the sorrowful remembrance.

"When I come here, Tiff...I have the strangest, oddest feeling...like a small part of me rightfully belongs here within its confines."

"Why do you not take permanent rooms in the village?"

"I come through here often. That is enough for me and probably for the best, I think."

* * * *

Tiffany lightly stroked the small of his back with soothing motions in understanding.

In her heart, she had complete faith in what he said, and, failed to say. She knew the man standing in front of her was definitely not insane. She believed him without reservation. Alexandre was an unusual man. It all made sense now: his unearthly beauty, his noticeable strength despite his lean, wiry build, and the strange magic emanating from the two of them when they were in each other's arm, which grew three times

stronger when they made love.

"I can understand why you've told no one else. I don't find what you've shared with me crazy or mad at all. Some things in this world are unexplainable. People experience things, know things that others will never know nor understand." She reached up to caress his face. "I believe you, and I believe *in* you. Baring your utmost thoughts to me will always be safe. You are whatever you are, Mr. Alexandre Luc DuPraden," the corner of her mouth lifting in a quick smile, "and I fully accept it. Always."

Suddenly a carefree expression chased away the look of bewilderment and uncertainty on Alexandre's face. "Thank goodness for that. After all these years, I've unloaded my secret to someone I can trust for its safekeeping."

For the first time in her presence, he burst out into a genuinely lighthearted laugh. The sound was beautiful in its purity. He grabbed her under the arms, and held her up in the air as if she weighed no more than a guinea and twirled her around and around, chuckling. "I love you, Tiff. I really, really love you."

The sun's rays chose that moment to strike against the inside of the circle they stood in, giving off an unearthly glow to the two sole occupants within.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

London, the world's largest city at nearly two-and-a-half million citizens given by last census count this year always teemed with the hustle and bustle of people. They – like others – had taken the more fascinating and quicker railways, thankfully putting the north countryside towns within reach of the great city.

Just as the Earl predicted, they arrived at the train station shortly before eleven and then took a hired hackney. The morning view from their window showed large crowds wending their way toward various parts of the city. One could see people on horseback, hear the clatter of carriage wheels through paved streets, watch strange-looking foreigners making their way to or from Hyde Park.

Not far from the entrance they passed tourist information stands arranging guided tours and giving lodging tips. Several families clutched satchels and small sacks, likely packed with

sandwiches and fruit so their only expense would be the admission.

“Fresh red apples for sale!” a female voice barked loudly. A middle-aged woman in a faded grey dress stood hawking what looked like a hundred red apples on a tray fastened around her waist by a thick rope. Beside her sat a straw basket of carrots and onions ready for a quick sale. “Try the Celebrated Exhibition Coffee,” an advertisement board read a few doors down, the storeowner linking his product, like so many other tradesmen, to the Great Exhibition. The slogan set out to promote a coffee brand made from the beans ‘of all Nations’ and it could be had for as little as sixpence-a-pound at Folkard’s on Drury Lane, opposite Queen Street.

When Alexandre saw the scene greeting him at the main entrance, the hordes of people walking about, he felt immeasurable relief. It would be difficult, nay impossible, for any who knew them, which he seriously doubted, to spot them so blatantly together. As it should be, all classes of people seemed equally intent on visiting. Though closed each Sunday, within a month of its opening the Commission lowered entrance fees from five shillings to one shilling – Monday thru Thursday – called the ‘shilling days’. That today was Tuesday, served Alexandre’s purposes quite well. Quite well, indeed.

The Earl's hand on hers, Tiffany stood for a moment soaking in the magnificent spectacle, the colorful flags of numerous countries adorning a three-tiered building, all of it residing within the lush grounds of Hyde Park. The Crystal Palace. Prince Albert's crowning achievement. The architectural and industrial symbol of British supremacy.

Never a favorite of his English citizenry because of his direct German heritage, customs and accent, Prince Albert was a dashing, intelligent man with penetrating blue eyes. Originally of Saxe-Coburg, a tiny principality compared to the vast areas the Queen of England laid claim to, the Prince had brought the subject of the Great Exhibition to the Government only for them to express little interest in the idea. In fact, they were pretty quick in shooting it down. Since Wainhaven sat on Parliament, he knew this quite well. He'd been one of the few who had expressed a genuine interest on the spot. Had nothing but respect for the uncrowned Prince and his behind-the-scene endeavors and who, for the worst of it, had not received the adulation he so rightfully deserved.

But on this issue—and others—the Prince remained quietly firm in his beliefs, and the affair was eventually approved. Afterward his Highness spent so much time and effort in seeing that the building's creation and the display of its massive

number of exhibits—well over one hundred thousand items in all—came to speedy fruition, he worked himself to near exhaustion. The Prince had been quite pleased that the gigantic structure, a pyramid of receding stories in glass and iron, had been built, astonishingly enough, from top to bottom in just nine short months. It pleased him the exhibit was the largest display of commodities ever brought together.

And people knew that whatever pleased Prince Albert, assuredly pleased Queen Victoria. They were the only royal couple Alexandre could think of who loved and remained faithful to each other. The Queen, rarely seen in public far from her husband's side, adored Albert.

"Mark my words, Tiff, this Exhibition will launch a new age in consumerism. For this alone, Prince Albert will be immortalized."

"Yes. Life will never be quite the same." She looked around her, at the people, at the outside activities, at the transformation of the park itself. "This will forever be known as the greatest fair in Britain history and the mold from which all others are replicated."

He nodded, looking around for a moment before he steered them to the westside entrance. They were in complete accord on the subject. "An absolute marvel."

Indeed, a marvel that a structure could be so

durable and strong when composed of so much glass—over nine hundred thousand square feet of it—bought from the Chance Brothers Glassworks in Smethwick, and ultimately affixed to two hundred miles of iron sash bars. All of it made possible by the ingenious use of railway transport, steam power and *prefabricated modules*! He knew the three-story structure enclosed by an enormous see-through dome—or transept—in the middle, encased several of Hyde Park’s fully-grown elm trees within its structure. It reminded Alexandre of a gargantuan, spectacularly furnished greenhouse. The exhibit, truly the first to invite contributions from all over the world, showed confidence that British manufacturers could sustain competition, and at the same time fuel further manufacturing and invention of every nation that attended. A fusion of arts and science that would hopefully stimulate consumerism.

The Exhibition was divided basically into four major sections: Raw Materials and Produce, Machinery & Mechanical Inventions, Manufactures, and Fine Arts. Alexandre and Tiffany decided at the outset that they couldn’t look at all the nations and even those that they did, they couldn’t scrutinized everything. A hit and miss excursion. After all, there were tens of thousands of exhibits and they couldn’t see it all in one day, nor could they risk being here all day long in any case.

"All the exhibits from England are grouped to the west of the central transept and all those of the other nations placed eastward," Alexandre said, perusing a small map he held in his hand.

"Fourteen thousand exhibitors and *a hundred thousand* exhibits, can you believe it?" she remarked softly in awe. "Exhibitors from different nations entrusting the evidences of their skill, their industry, and their enterprise to the guardianship of a modest number of policemen armed with no other weapon beside a baton."

"Yes, so many exhibitors and even more attendees." He took a good glimpse at his surroundings, a thoughtful expression on his face. Though it brought millions of people into the Hyde Park area, up to this point things had been remarkably peaceful. Policemen had apprehended only twelve pickpockets rather than a problematic number of criminals, vagrants, or heaven forbid, hordes of fanatical revolutionists. "Amazing that each day passes and no added show of force is needed for the safety of immeasurable wealth placed within such fragile walls. In no other country in the world could such an exhibition of the industrial arts taken place."

Alexandre approached the counter, paid a shilling for each of them and then both stepped eagerly inside.

A perfusion of color was Alexandre's first

thought.

Designed around a single corridor, the *grand aisle*, or chief walkway, the structure was divided in the middle by a huge dome. In the grand aisle, farther than the eye can see, a showcase awaited filled to the brim with works of arts and other wares. One long vista of novelties perpetually changing from one room to the next. Women wore a variety of expressions on their faces, dressed in what seemed a never-ending array of color and style. Since seats lining either side of the grand aisle were reserved exclusively for ladies, a gentleman could stand in the center of the building and see stretching to all four corners, nothing but lines of seated women.

It looked like the exhibitors had done a great deal with their allotted spaces. Each article was given a short caption and a number, both of which were also placed in the four-volume Official Catalogue. Every nook, every corner, every shelf, and table packed with items. Since Britain reserved the west end of the building for its things, and they'd entered from that entrance, it made sense to begin their sightseeing there.

The first thing they noticed were four Versailles-style mirrors and below them, a basilica-sized organ surrounded by daguerreotypes, clocks, and hanging globes. Colossal statues, sculptures in bronze and zinc,

pillars of marble, feathers and specimens of silk all lavishly arranged. Not far, a giant telescope attracted a great deal of attention from the crowd, and an elaborately designed clock sat on a nearby table reputed to work faithfully for 100 years before requiring to be wound up again.

"It is hard to believe," he murmured, stretching his arm in all-encompassing motion. "I'm glad we came."

"So am I."

Tiffany squeezed Alexandre's arm in barely contained excitement. "I have it on good authority from Lady Charlotte that the Exhibition is so popular among the daily crowds it has already consumed well over a million buns!" She began stroking his arm-sleeve in a wholly unconscious, lover-like caress before she realized her actions and primly put her hand back at her side. "This affair is proving to be a triumphant success and it isn't even over yet."

Instantly, Alexandre felt the heat rush up the arm she stroked, but he dutifully ignored the pleasurable sensation her touch invoked. "Are you referring to us or the Exhibition?" Alexandre teased, then chuckled when she shook her head in exasperation.

"Really, Wainhaven!"

"Actually, I think this event has probably caused the greatest movement of citizenry ever to

take place in Britain," Alexandre murmured softly.

"Yes—and such a general mixture of classes too. Although I must say most of the fashionable society virtually ignore the exhibits altogether," she speculated, after seeing a few women hovering around the central area last time she'd attended and noted those same ladies had not budged from their positions, "choosing, instead, to remain in the transept *to see and be seen*."

Belatedly, he nodded in affirmation as he took a quick glance at the sheer volume of spectators milling around them. On average, the average daily attendance figures for the one-shilling days—religiously reported by the morning papers he read—stood at a staggering fifty thousand people.

"There is probably only a small number of the ton here on this September day." *A good number of them are probably still in their nightgowns.* "Most of the tourists are middle- and working-class or foreigners—which by the way, suits our purposes splendidly."

She gave him a knowing look. The situation meant little risk of being caught by one of the wealthy members of society who knew them. She gave a thankful sigh of relief and for the first time since entering the building, her outward demeanor relaxed.

"It isn't just the Mechanical Inventions, but all the Fine Arts objects here reveal some technical expertise or they were not permitted in," remarked Alexandre, turning in her direction.

"Really?"

"Absolutely. If you stick close by my side, Tiffany Iverson, you'll learn a great deal." He winked at her. "And if you stay by my side forever, I can assure you, you learn more than you ever dreamed of."

* * * *

"Is that a threat or merely an assurance, Lord Alexandre?" she asked demurely.

"Both, sweet pie. Both."

"So it's sweet *pie* now, is it? Before, it was sweet *tart*."

"Mmmhmm. Given your love of eating the treats, it's an apt name for you today." She'd eaten two this morning and would undoubtedly be quite blunt in asking for a third. It was one of the things he loved about her—her refreshing straightforwardness.

They walked further down the aisle. Columns painted in vertical strips of blue, white and yellow contrasting with red-painted signs, red drapes, and red canopies could be seen everywhere. Red and green seemed to be the favorite backdrop. A

scimitar and scabbard, captioned, "Fine Arts, No. 83', listed by Wilkinson & Son in London instantly caught Alexandre's eye. Made of chased and gilt silver, it contained one hundred and four precious stones, consisting of emeralds, rubies, turquoises, and diamonds inserted into an arabesque pattern with tassels hanging at the end of the hilt. Due to its embossment and the jewels, the blade actually possessed two decorative elevations, not one.

Fortune and merry weather, was upon them at the next table, for the good doctor, George Merryweather, stood in front of a small crowd of onlookers describing to them his latest mechanical device, the *Tempest Prognosticator*. "I observed that before the onset of a severe storm, leeches tended to become particularly agitated to the electrical change in the atmosphere, he said."

Curious themselves, Tiffany and Alexandre hurried up to get a look and to hear what the doctor had to say, shamelessly nudging several avid bystanders in the process.

"Installed at the circular base are twelve pint-sized, clear glass jars containing a single medicinal leech," he went on to say after giving them a disapproving look, "and one-and-a-half inches of rain water. It is connected via a metal tube containing a piece of whalebone followed by a thin chain and bell."

He paused for a moment, giving the privileged

group a moment to digest that bit of information. He did not, after all, stand by his display giving brief talks every single day! "When the leeches sense stormy conditions, they ascend through the tubes and dislodge the whalebone, thus causing the bell attached at the end to ring a warning." Indeed, an altogether strange-looking contrivance, Merryweather firmly declared it an effective discovery in foretelling thunderstorms.

Vast arrays of silk dresses and shawls, lace and embroideries, jewelry and clocks and watches, and glass chandeliers all graced Britain's Manufacturing & Mechanical sections in the upstairs galleries. In small rooms and large rooms, sat perfumery, toys, fishing materials, wax flowers, stained glass.

"I would so love to run my hands over the particular piece with its marvelous lines and smooth edges" she replied wistfully of the delicate little tea service no bigger than a crown. She knew she couldn't of course, because no one there, rich or poor, could handle the merchandise. She understood why the exhibits remained firmly off-limits—they'd be broken, damaged, or a sore temptation to nimble fingers within minutes.

"Here's the painted oil-cloth from the Manchester area I told you about, Tiffany." He pointed at the wall hanging, his expression one of awe. "It's covered with the most extraordinary

mathematical ornamentations. It took the gentleman who did it eleven years to complete. It's rumored to be worth about five hundred guineas."

"It's quite brilliant," replied Tiffany, as she scooted up to get a better look at the ingenious piece of work that had Wainhaven spellbound. "It's worth every guinea, too." When it seemed as if he intended to stand there half the day gazing at it, Tiffany affectionately hastened him along.

An intriguing piece of artwork from the town of Portsmouth came next. Surrounded by a hunter green cloth-covered table, sat a small piece of gold engraved with 'The Lord's Prayer'. "The entire engraved part is so tiny my two hatpins could cover it!" she cried," her breath catching at the sights in front of her. "And a replica of an English steam engine, small enough one could lay it, and the plate it stands on, inside a walnut shell."

"Here is another contribution, and a very attractive one at that," said the Earl, standing with his hands behind his back, as if contemplating the merits of the colorful scene sitting grandly on a red-covered table. The model, made by a common workman in his leisure time, was none other than the house of the great playwright, Shakespeare. The man and his house were surrounded by various figures representing the different scenes from his plays. The workman called it the

‘Shakespeare Jubilee’.

“How on earth do they manage to make such things?” She glanced at Alexandre in wonder.

“I don’t know.” Alexandre shook his head, bewildered. “All I know is, how ever they do it, it takes a great deal of time and a great deal of patience.”

* * * *

Inside one of the larger galleries a few rooms down, several different beds complete with coverings, wall hangings, and bed-curtained canopies were organized in a row. The elaborately decorated queen-sized bed exhibited by Rogers and Dean of England proved a disappointment compared to the tasteful vision of the English tea service viewed a short time ago.

“Apparently these two gentlemen have mistaken gaudiness for splendor.” Alexandre shook his head in displeasure. The color of the bedcover; scarlet, bright green, white, and straw-colored, and the canopy itself; green, trimmed with a fairly crippling selection of other colors, among which were red and yellow. And of all horrors, the curtains surrounding the bed comprised deep-blue and orange colored flowers with green leaves all on a white ground!

Alexandre and Tiffany stared at the bed before them, trying to make some sense out of its color scheme. He certainly could find none.

"Good grief! Well...what do you think of it?" Tiffany looked as baffled as the bed's ornamentation did in front of them.

"This bed is the most confusing mass of colors I've ever seen in my life. Makes me wonder if the gentlemen weren't in their cups when they created this monstrosity. Well, hell," came his laconic reply before Tiffany, clucking her tongue in total agreement, quickly urged him onward.

"It's apparent to me the British Manufactures are inferior, at least in design and color technique, to our foreign neighbors in carpets and apparel. France and India will probably have much to commend it in these areas," he commented sagely. And no wonder. The French had had schools of design for over a century, as a result of the attention paid in those schools to harmony of colors and design, their Manufactures would no doubt exhibit better coloring and styling.

"In apparel, too? Nonsense!"

His answer was to arch his brows in an I-know-what-I'm-talking-about look.

"You think so, do you? Well, we shall see. Due to your biting comment, the French and India departments are now definitely on our list of sightseeing."

Not to be outdone in all areas, Britain's Machinery area, besides remarkable steam engines, hydraulic presses, an envelope maker, and loads of other things they couldn't begin to scrutinize, stood a measuring machine capable of measuring to the hundred-thousandth of an inch. Now, that was impressive indeed. Exiting the popular Machinery department, they strolled past several more pieces of sculpture.

One, a colossal full-figure of St Michael conquering Satan; another, of the Duke of Wellington; and yet another, of an Amazon who is just about to hurl her javelin at a ferocious tiger fastened onto the neck of her frightened horse. More curious, however, was that of the fictitious character, *Mazeppa*—a famous London play of the same name based on Byron's poem. It is a bloodthirsty tale of crazy love and mayhem about a man caught in a scandalous relationship. In punishment he is tied back-to-back on a wild stallion beaten almost into madness and released to gallop away with him atop, as a large vulture looms on the horizon. Stopping only at the point of near death, the horse slows in the Ukraine where *Mazeppa* is finally rescued.

Alexandre's interest perked up considerably when they visited the next gallery to the right.

The section housed nothing but scaled-down models. Models of this and models of that. He

strolled up to the one comprising the city of London, then on to dioramas of other cities in exacting details down to the curve of the lamppost. Fascinated, he simply stared, then looked over to find Tiffany eying yet several models of churches.

"This stuff is extraordinarily detailed, Tiff. I can even make out the subtle differences of the leaves on one of the trees."

Moving eastward, they followed the path of several life-size locomotives set on railroad tracks, and stopped to browse over one of several huge booths that displayed tools of every imaginable size and description. Alexandre examined the tools as carefully as he could before being jostled by a boisterous group of university upstarts who also wanted to see the display up close.

"So many things, Alex. So many. All laid out in exacting detail for any spectator to see."

"Let's see what Scotland has for us wee spectators," said Alexandre, in a good imitation of a brogue.

* * * *

Scotland stood only a few yards away, and since Tiffany's late grandmother was Scottish, she couldn't very well *not* have a peek inside. An immense block of granite of the highest quality

about twenty feet long, sat on a green rug on the floor. Microscopes, barometers, optical instruments and mining machinery, printing presses, and machines for making gas as well as a machine for printing cotton on both sides could be found in other their sections.

Tiffany stopped to a complete halt to admire at a young girl's dress done beautifully in rose and ivory from Glasgow. The richly embroidered muslin, from the extensive factory of T. & D. Levinworth, though elaborate was really quite exceptional. The dress looked as though it would fit a girl of about ten or eleven. The short, puffed sleeves ended with a underlying, vertical trim of ivory lace. The front-most part of the dress, embroidered with small rose- and cream-colored swirls flowed in a delicate arc to about four inches from the hemline while the sides and back of the dress shone in a single shade of ivory. From there the dress ran in vertical lines in the same alternating rose and ivory color as the lower half of the sleeves.

"It's quite charming, don't you think?"

Alexandre eyed the item and murmured his assent, then promptly moved on to the next item on display. When he realized Tiffany still stood in front of the dress admiring it, he returned to her side and cocked his head, jokingly mirroring her look of contemplation.

Tiffany looked at the dress, a speculative look on her face. "I wonder how much it would cost to buy," she mused, then rapidly began calculating the monetary value of the dress since price tags weren't allowed on any item exhibited. "It's about twenty pounds."

"No, that's too much," Alexandre countered, getting into the banter of things, "it can't be more than five pounds—it's a child's dress for heaven sakes."

"Nonsense. You're wrong of course. Fifteen pounds, ten shillings."

"Eight pounds."

"Ten!"

"We're probably both wrong. Come on, let's go," he teased, urging her on to the next item.

"Eight!"

"Tiffany. I already said that amount," came his dry reply. "Come on, before the policeman strolls over and shoos us away."

"What? Shoo the great Earl of Wainhaven away," she put her hand to her forehead in a mock swoon. "Never say."

"Well, I'm afraid I do say, pie tart."

"Pie tart!"

He leaned down and murmured, "Mmmm...a very edible...very scrumptious...pie tart."

Tiffany strove very hard not to blush. And failed.

Gently leading her away, he said, "Come on, let's look at the muskets and swords on display. The detail is first rate, I think. Let's have a better look at them and determine for ourselves."

"Oh, let's not, sweetheart. We don't have enough time to browse that area," wheedled Tiffany.

"What did you just call me?" he whispered, his body stilling.

* * * *

Tiffany had called him an endearment out in full public, without conscious thought. And it exalted him. *Just once more in public, in his lifetime, he wanted to hear it.* "I didn't hear you."

"I—I...called you 'sweetheart'," she repeated softly, round-eyed at her brazenness.

"And am I?"

"Yes, you are truly."

He grinned. "In that case, I guess it's on to the next area on *your* list."

Unabashed, she exclaimed, "Switzerland!"

Next to Morocco leather and leopard coats, the carpets, and the ottoman covers hung a large overhead sign that said 'Turkey' in big block letters leading to where else? The Turkish area.

"Look!" Tiffany exclaimed pointing in the direction of the Jerusalem pavilion. A vast

collection of ornaments and marble objects beckoned but they bypassed the intriguing area.

"Perhaps, we'll visit that area next time we come."

"We'd better make it soon." The Crystal Palace, as originally coined by *Punch* magazine, would be closing its doors in less than a month from now.

Two eager faces peered around the corner and looked straight up at the signs leading to the Tunisian area and right behind it, Switzerland. On a pedestal, not far from the door stood a sculpture of a woman completely nude from the waist up, her nipples enticingly and fully erect. Alexandre glanced at the sculpture and gave Tiffany a wicked smile. No point in scrutinizing it. There were plenty female nudes and semi-nudes about the place surprisingly enough, and to the delight no doubt of nearly every man who entered the building.

"Well, don't give me that look...there's plenty of nude male sculptures standing about as well, you know."

"You're my sculpture," said Alexandre with amiable guile.

"That, dear Alex, was the perfect reply." She gave him a smirk. "Let's keep moving toward the center of the building, there's an especially lovely fountain there." Skipping over one display after another, they soon found themselves within a few

yards of the building's domed transept. The center.

Alexandre looked up to admire the ingenuity behind the enclosure of fully-grown elm trees, leaves and all, within the structure of the building. He wasn't surprised when Tiffany immediately marched up to the central area where the famous three-tiered crystal fountain stood twenty seven feet high. Four tons of pale pink glass carved with exceptional skill jetted water high into the air where it magically seemed to catch the filtered light hovering above it.

"The perfect Victorian fountain."

"Hmm. The perfect fountain, huh? I thought the fountain of youth was the perfection fountain," he teased.

"Very funny." She scrunched her nose up at him.

On entering Switzerland, their attention immediately swept to the right. A beautiful lady's writing table made of two kinds of wood, red and white which symbolized the Swiss national colors, stood near a wooden mantelpiece polished to a glossy cinnamon finish. Carved with figures of men and animals and other ornamentation it was designed in such a way that merely pressing a button allowed the entire contents of the desk to be laid out before the spectator. At the same time, a seat and stand for writing unfolded, as if by

magic, for the lady's use.

"Oh, how clever. I could certainly use one of those."

"So could I—and I'm not a lady," he joked.

"No, you most certainly aren't. You are one prime..." she bit off, coloring slightly. "Let's go see what other treasures can be found, shall we? Gadgets are abundant throughout the entire Exhibition," she informed him in bright tones. "Everywhere one looks."

Wisely, he didn't comment on her near slip of the lip, instead he murmured, "Far too many to count." *Mmmmm...so I'm one prime specimen, am I?* The thought made him smile.

Among the articles well worth the look was a baroque-style Swiss army knife containing not one, but eighty separate blades, and a table made of thirty eight thousand pieces of wood, of twenty-eight different colors. It looked like a beautiful mosaic. What a work of art.

"Switzerland's scenery is most charming. I've been there, you know," she turned to him conversationally while her steps slowed a bit. "There are towering mountains, craggy rocks of dizzying heights, and steep precipices with foaming torrents of waterfalls dashing down their sides. Have you ever been to Switzerland?"

"I'm afraid I've not had the pleasure yet. I once made plans to do so, but due to a business

emergency I had to cancel the excursion at the last moment. I never re-planned the trip."

"Oh, it's not to be missed. There are crystal blue lakes and valleys interspersed with fir, chestnut, and beech trees. Some of the mountains are scattered with cottages despite the possible danger of snow slides rolling down from the mountaintops."

"Perhaps one day I shall sneak you with me in one of my oversized trunks, and we can see the splendors of the Swiss," Tiffany teased affectionately.

"I look forward to it..." the corner of his mouth lifted and he arched a brow, "that, and the possibility of being buried under a huge ball of snow."

Her chuckle was cut off by a sudden scuffling noise that caught their attention. Turning, Tiffany and Alexandre watched in amusement as four complete strangers, two of whom were quite rotund, tried to go through Switzerland's exit door all at the same time. They nearly knocked over the table holding an Alpine rose box in their mad attempt to be the first one out the door and on to the next room. One finally squeezed triumphantly through and moved on, leaving the outraged laggards behind.

"My heavens, would you look at that? How indecent," a fashionably dressed woman behind

them spat indignantly.

* * * *

Due to constraints on their senses as well as their time, other countries were scratched—all totally skipped over in a blur. So, too, was Spain with its multitude of raw materials & produce on display such as olives, lemons, oranges, honey and other dried fruits.

“Ohhh, Alex,” she groaned, “We will most definitely have to come back and see Spain. They have such—”

“I know, I know,” he cut her off, rolling his eyes and exaggeratingly shaking his head. “They have such handsomely-crafted swords, diamonds and emeralds.”

“I wonder what all these walls are made of,” Tiffany murmured a few minutes later, looking around the next room curiously.

“There’s a significant amount of gypsum found in the various departments, the result of plaster of Paris—so called because it is found in abundance in France’s capital—the porous material is known for its hardness and durability. Tiff—the southern walls, not only in the English division, but those that extend throughout the building, including the transept, use this plaster of Paris material for their walls.”

She glanced over at him, impressed. "My, my. You're a veritable mountain of information, Wainhaven."

He grinned, looking boyish, charming, and seductive all at the time. "I try to be from time to time. He winked conspiratorially. "Impressing you is a good thing. Indeed, a very good thing."

"The place certainly has its share of red and green," Alexandre commented later. The building itself being light and cool contrasted well with the strong or rich colors of many of the articles exhibited. Most were set on, or around, dark and semi-neutral colors. The favorite backdrop colors that pervaded the building, however, appeared to be green and red.

Tiffany nodded. "Lady Felicity remarked that the Tunisian department has a number of dresses showcasing both those colors. She also mentioned a cotton print in which a particularly brilliant shade of scarlet combined with an ultra cool shade of green. She complained the inharmonious effect upon her poor eyes had been almost painful."

"Can't say as I blame her. It would've been more endurable if the print had been paired with another color altogether. It was probably one of Britain's," he said crisply, knowing he'd get a rise from her.

Located in the north end of the grand aisle, a tropical paradise awaited them in what was called

the *Tropical Fountain Basin*. There, a fall garden and masses of rich green ferns, colorful lilies and small circular ponds, containing perhaps six inches of water, were strategically placed giving the illusion of an outdoor garden paradise. Large pots of ferns and a perfusion of water lilies rested inside the ponds, while verdant shrubs and plants stood side by side along tropical flowers washed the area in soothing color, all against the awe-inspiring background of iron beams and glass.

They didn't tarry at the Fountain Basin for long, however. A quick breeze-through of Canada's raw produce, including their famous syrups, and it was off to Germany.

As fate would have it, they weren't able to see much of anything in the German Pavilion due to a large bus tour of people roaming the rooms with badged tour guides. They did manage, however, to get a good look at a fascinating German bed where a built-in apparatus, would after being wound up like a clock to a certain hour, awaken the sleeper instantly via a distinct pattern of noises and vibrations.

"Perfect for lazy sleepers like you, I suspect." Alexandre tried to keep a straight face.

"Alex!"

"We didn't get a chance to see Germany," he acknowledged as he guided them out of the area and slowed down for a moment, "but they

brought a bunch of stuffed animals...some of their expressions are quite funny, Tiffany. There was one of a fox with a rosary in his hand confessing his sins to, *of all things*, a rooster who appeared to listen quite gravely while he read the fox a sermon on his wickedness. I remember, too, seeing this imitation," he spread out his hands about twelve inches apart to illustrate the article's approximate width, "of a Chinese camellia japonica tree, with buds, leaves, and white blossoms – all perfect."

"Oh really? I didn't see that on the one time I visited. I heard they brought beautiful household furniture—a cabinet made from different pieces of amber intended to show the different kinds and variations of that mineral. I did note a splendid tray of polished amber, containing a miniature model of a carriage while at the other extreme, a huge chandelier, also of amber and capable of holding over a thousand tiny lights, hung from the ceiling."

"The amber cabinet is amazing." He nodded, idly fingering the ring on his right pinkie his mother had given him on his twelfth birthday. Why he'd suddenly worn it today out of the blue, he couldn't begin to guess. He'd practically had to dust the cobwebs off. He glanced at the antique silver ring with its arc of amber shaped like a quarter moon in the middle, and watched as the amber flashed when it hit the light on an angle.

"Several people have remarked on its stunning qualities. Personally, I love amber. What I've seen of it. Here, take a look," he said, holding out his hand so she could see it in detail.

"It's beautiful, Alex," she replied, looking at the delicate but flawless design of the ring. "I noticed on it you finger earlier this morning. You should wear it more often. I really like it."

His look turned thoughtful. "Yes...maybe I will."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Strolling up to the sign that indicated 'Persia', they vacillated whether to go inside.

"No time!" they said in smiling unison.

"Did you know Persia's commerce with other countries is conducted by means of *caravans*—large convoys—of merchants," she continued on as they walked, "who travel together for security from thieves often trying to rob them. The convoys frequently have a hundred or more camels carrying their luggage and goods."

"Of course I didn't know that."

"I didn't think you did," she replied archly. "They also create excellent carpets and swords."

Hiding a smile, he gave her an elegant bow, and replied tongue-in-cheek, "Thank you for that educational update. I trust you'll be teaching me a few things in this relationship too."

"You're welcome. And yes, I will."

Alexandre glanced at his timepiece and

squelched a groan of dismay. My, my—even breezing through things the way they had, they'd still been here for over two hours already. The splendid display of carriages and linen from Belgium, all the specimens from the West Indies, including that tempting array of produce they'd contributed, would have to be foregone this day.

"The next stop will have to be France," he stated firmly.

"Agreed!" said Tiffany.

France's pavilion held an impressive frontage of furniture, along with quite a magnificent court for its decorative hanging wall plates, bronzes, china dinnerware, carpets, and jewelry. "Alexandre, look at their exquisite displays. France will no doubt be winning a top award each for their craftsmanship in the Manufactures and Fine Arts divisions from the panel of judges."

"This place includes just about every marvel of the Victorian age."

"I know. This tapestry in particular is quite beautiful," she said, pointing to the tapestry and its small caption underneath that indicated it had been made from the *Gobelin* Factory.

Alexandre nodded. "The Gobelin family, located in Paris, France, is an excellent weaver and dyer of cloth. They're known for imbuing their designs with rich pictorial details and are gifted duplicators of actual pictures. It is a splendid wall

hanging. Indeed, some of the designs here copied from actual paintings almost surpass the originals in terms of beauty."

Alexandre was soon proven right.

France's carpets had a more pleasing color arrangement. Where the British used three or four shades of the same colored wool, the French weaver used twenty or thirty shades. It meant the latter united his tints by imperceptible gradation, and thus prevented the abruptness arising from colors far removed from each other. The more numerous the gradation of color, the softer and richer the effect.

"See. I told you. Like Persia, French carpets do not emulate the British's stark blend of colors," he verbally noted, eyeing a large arabesque carpet whose natural-looking flowers and gradations of color created a sense of harmony. He stopped to admire another specimen, this time, done in black, white and red.

"In this one, Tiff, the black and white is patterned around the red base color. Although the colors are very different, it's quite nice. For whatever reason, I find the geometric patterns appealing. The more complex, the better."

On seeing an attendant standing around, idle on this particular occasion and a look of polite boredom on his ruddy face, Alexandre saw his opportunity and took it.

"Excuse me for a second. I want to ask a question of that assistant." Eyes straying toward the carpet, he went over and quietly inquired if the man carried a business card of any sort. The attendant said a few words, shaking his head apologetically.

Alexandre returned looking slightly mollified. "He didn't have any cards, but he did tell me the particulars on how to get in contact with the weaver."

"Really? I didn't see you jotting anything down."

"It's all in here," he replied, tapping two fingers against his head.

It became clear that some of the exhibits viewed during the course of their wanderings concentrated on innovative solutions bordering on the very strange; a safety hat for the prevention of concussion in case of a train crash—*who would wear such a thing as part of their daily fashionable wear?* Alexandre had wondered out loud. Corsets that snapped opened instantly in case of 'emergency'—*what would happen if the contraption malfunctioned thus opening in a non-emergency?* Yachting outfits that contained built-in flotation devices—a press of a button and the outfit *ballooned out*; and the 'ventilating' man's hat that allowed airflow via a valve fixed to the top, which opened and closed like a lever allowing

perspiration to escape. *How odd was that?*

Others promised speed; a doctor's suit had a coat, waistcoat, and trousers made in one piece so in a nighttime *emergency*, the doctor might leap into them without a second's waste of time. Or the 'Duplexa' jacket, when flipped inside out could be worn as a morning coat and as an evening coat all on the same day. They'd seen a couch, made for a steamship, which could be turned into a bed at night, while the base, made of cork, acted as a life raft should the worst happen. If the worst didn't happen, of course, the couch had at one end a washstand complete with the necessities for one's toilette, while at the other end a portable watercloset lie tucked away for the user's, uh, bodily needs.

Would anyone actually buy these things?

And all the while, Tiffany examined the inventions in frank amazement.

With a laugh, she examined yet another odd bed, which in the morning tilted its occupants straight into a waiting bath. "Oh my. I wager there'll be no excuse to lay about in bed unclean with this contraption *or* the other one we saw. Only it awakened its sleepy occupants with the buzzing of a loud alarm and automatic trembling, possibly tossing them on the floor instead," Tiffany remarked, breaking into another peel of muffled laughter.

The mental images it provoked, of trembling beds and people in stocking caps rolling around and hanging on for dear life were so funny, Alexandre burst out into laughter too.

* * * *

On entering the south part, one couldn't help but feel a sense of beauty and grandeur, in part owing to the natural light flooding against contrasting shadows, along with the rich colors of the objects on view.

"For a feast of exotic splendor, the India exhibit was something to behold," Alexandre remarked at first sight of the merchandise. Located in the south entrance the beauty and ingenuity of the some of the native costumes were, in their view, even prettier than any of those they had already seen. Veils, dresses, shawls, carved ivory chairs sat alongside colorful baskets and fans in dizzying hues.

In the India Raw Materials section came teas, cocoanuts, unfamiliar roots, woods—especially beautiful teak woods—and tempting fruits, along with muslin and silks embroidered with precious metals and gems, displayed against a backdrop of reds, burnt oranges, or blues.

"Alex. Look at all this amazing beauty! It's like some treasure-filled cavern from an Egyptian

king's tomb," she exclaimed, surveying the area in general before her eyes landed on the natural wonder sitting encaged in thick glass six feet high. Inside the cage sat the famous *Koh-i-noor* diamond Queen Victoria acquired last year from Shah Sooja. And last but certainly not least, a throne that fairly glittered in gold and silver, while a lovely royal bed complete with silver and gold pieces lay atop of bedcovers done in a hue of midnight blue.

"Oh thank heavens," replied Tiffany in relief on spotting a watercloset once they left India.

"Alex, I need to go to the ladies' room." She rummaged in her reticule and plucked out a pence. It cost a penny to use the bathroom for the ladies, while the urinals were free for the men.

"I might as well go too, since we're in the vicinity. The bright person who thought of setting these things up has probably made a small fortune off you ladies. Think of all the women and girls who have already used these facilities over the past few months. Some more than once."

"Yes, I can only imagine. He could have made an even bigger fortune if he'd charged the men and male children a penny too," she replied dryly.

"Jealous?"

"Definitely."

Coming out of the makeshift bathroom, they walked a short distance to admire a meticulously wrought sculpture done in zinc. Only there a

couple minutes, they overheard two men talking. Actually, the two young men spoke loud enough anyone around them could overhear.

"The Great Exhibition is unpopular with a few of the merchants, you know. They grumble it's, 'killed business for the entire season'. Matthews says his inn hasn't fared so well since that new railway hotel catering to rail passengers and them foreigners sprouted up not far from his."

"A few theaters complain even louder." The man next to him shook his head. "One manager said, and I quote like 'e said it, 'Them idle blockheads and sappers—'er, soldiers—sauntering about at all hours of the day, except at *my* establishment'. Well, I like the Exhibition fine enough and so does the missus..."

At that moment, a stranger accidentally bumped into the back of Alexandre. "Excuse me, sir," a distracted, masculine voice muttered.

"That's quite all right." Alexandre turned around and found himself looking down into the craggy visage of what looked to be the epitome of a cranky and elderly scholar. The tall, thin man wore a brown overcoat and his pure white hair hung in wisps from beneath a worn black hat. Good grief, he was looking at a mirror image of Dickens's Ebenezer Scrooge, he thought in some amusement.

"With the number of people here today it's to

be expected," Alexandre replied graciously to the elderly man.

"Expected!" The man snorted. "All those people let loose upon one poor city," he exclaimed. "Any serious study is completely impossible, I tell you. Impossible! Impossible!"

"Surely, it's not so bad as that."

The man gave Alexandre an indignant look. "It's worse. Worse! Bearded men in their country's outfits abound on every corner street of London. Revelers literally clogging the arteries of our roads," said the man as he bandied his black walking cane about for emphasis. "May the Fates never send the like again in my lifetime. Can't wait to be rid of the street-cabs loaded with merrymakers!"

The peeved man stomped away, leaving Tiffany and Alexandre standing there agape. They looked at each other and burst out in muffled giggles.

What rotten, damnable luck. In an entire throng of hundreds and hundreds of people.

Lady Amelia Carlisle waved her handkerchief gaily at Alexandre and then moved in her usual sedate fashion toward their direction.

"Surely, she's not coming here?" he exclaimed on a violent groan though his face showed nothing but neutrality.

"Who? Who?" Curious, Tiffany prepared to

turn around to see for herself.

"No! Don't turn around. For God sakes, don't." For once, he felt like Clifford at times must. He smiled in acknowledgment as the second worst rumormonger in the entire city, probably in all of Great Britain, came bearing down on them.

* * * *

Too late to act as if he didn't know Tiffany, he could barely stifle a groan. The Baroness—Lady Arendalle—had no doubt already seen the two of them in conversation. Damn. He didn't have time to explain to Tiffany. In fact, time was of the essence.

Grinding his teeth, he said quickly, "Tiff, act as though you're going on your merry way. We'll meet at the Huntley & Palmers Biscuits stand. We'll grab refreshments when I get there."

Tiffany immediately understood the situation and her acting fell smoothly into place as if she'd spent a lifetime career on the stage. Not once making eye contact and appearing oblivious about the woman in question, right before the Baroness arrived, Tiffany neatly curtsied to the Earl, and murmured in a clear, normal voice, "It was good talking with you." She beat a careful but hasty retreat.

"Oh my," smiled the Baroness, "what a

pleasant surprise seeing you here today, Lord Wainhaven." Then in a forthright manner she inquired, "Who is the young lady you just finished conversing with, by the way? I didn't catch a good look at her." Her eyes as usual, were bright with curiosity. "She's wearing the hugest bonnet. I daresay it covers most of her face."

Alexandre cursed again. The sheer nerve of the woman to ask him such an impertinent question! It was none of her business.

Nonetheless, he pasted an innocent look on his face and casually turned his head in the opposite direction his sweet love had gone in while thinking on his feet as he did so. He knew he had only seconds to give an answer and it had better be the right one given in the right tone. He turned on the full force of his charm and smiled airily. The smile was meant to dazzle and deflect. And it did.

"That, Lady Arendalle, is Viscountess Rathbern. I do believe she came here with her mother today. She and her husband are dear friends of mine. I'll no doubt see and speak with her on several occasions before the morning is over, I warrant."

"Oh...yes. Lady Rathbern...such a dear girl. Can't say I know her husband all that well."

That is an overstatement if ever there was one. The Viscount barely knew the woman at all. He'd only gone to her house a couple times, and that,

out of respect for the woman's late husband whom Clifford had met mere months before the man's untimely death.

"Lord Wainhaven, I want to extend an invitation to you to join the supper party I'm giving this weekend on Saturday. May I expect you there?"

For the third time in as many minutes, Alexandre belted out another silent curse. *No! No-no- no- no. No!* He wished he could shout the words out, but he couldn't. "I regret to say that I am otherwise engaged for dinner but I would be delighted to join your festivities for the later part of the evening."

"Excellent." She beamed up at him, caught in the flare of his beautiful looks and impeccable manners.

Before she could strike up any more conversation, he spoke up first. "A pleasure, indeed," he said and then bowed elegantly, subtly putting an end to any further chitchat. "I will see you on Saturday, Baroness."

"Yes, of course. Well, I must find my friend and take my leave of this wonderful place, I have many errands and social calls to make today. Been here much too long as it is," she expounded self-importantly. "We all shall be delighted to see you there."

I just bet you have many social calls to make, he

interjected silently. "Good day to you," he smiled. "Until Saturday, then..."

* * * *

Tiffany stood tensely erect when he spotted her several minutes later.

"Is she gone—as in gone for the rest of the day?"

"Yes. She and her friend took their leave shortly after I spoke to her."

"Did you know," the Earl continued on in soothing tones, when he stood close by her side once more, "that Mr. Schweppes paid fifty-five hundred pounds to offer refreshments, and has ended up selling over one million sixty thousand small bottles of mineral water, Ginger beer, soda water, and lemonade? The man has made a tremendous return on his investment, wouldn't you think? And for that free bit of trivia, my dear, you can buy me lemonade and bread."

"What do you have a taste for by the way? I'm famished," he said a heartbeat later. He eyed the selection of venison hungrily from one vendor and golden-crust bread from another. He hadn't eaten anything since early this morning when he left the house at a god-forsaken hour for the express purpose of whisking Tiffany away.

"How kind of you to inquire." She arched a

brow at him.

Well, I suppose I could buy you lunch. You deserve it...and so much more. I want..." Her voice trailed off without finishing.

What did she want? The two of them? The three of them?

When he looked down at her face, he didn't say the sentimental words flowing from his mind. Instead, he let his expression speak the love he desperately felt.

Silent, Alexandre selected a small hunch of venison from a vendor's middle row and a large chunk of French bread. At the last second, he chose a sausage roll as well. Tiffany, on the other hand, moved to the next food stall right beside Schweppes, choosing the wafers from Huntley's to go along with her bottle of flavored soda water. When she reached in her reticule to pay for everything, he forestalled her.

"I jest about paying for the food. You paid enough when you paid a pence to use the ladies' room. I'll not have you thinking me a fortune hunter." He winked.

"Oh, gone on! You? A fortune hunter," she chuckled, "you *are* a fortune!" She shot him a feisty look, "but if you insist, I'll let you pay."

"I do insist." He reached in his pocket and pulled out several shillings to pay the side-by-side vendors.

As chance would have it, there were two empty chairs in a small corner near the busy concession area. They made a mad dash for them to beat out anyone else entertaining thoughts of grabbing them. Over light banter, flavored soda water, and lemonade, Tiffany and Alexandre ate their midday meal.

"The food wasn't too bad, all things considered," Alexandre remarked, standing up and brushing off the crumbs that had fallen on his thighs. Glad he hadn't spilled anything on his shirt or coat given how quickly he dispatched his meal down his mouth.

"The wafers are delicious, are you sure you don't want to try one for later?"

He grimaced and stopped abruptly. "I don't care for sugar, any of it—you know that." The higher the sugar content, the more violently it nauseates me." Visions of bonbons and cinnamon buns heaped with sugary icing danced in his head...it was enough to make him shudder.

"Yes, I know, but for a moment, I forgot," she said. She gave him a candid glance and then looked away, suddenly ill at ease.

His hand reached out and lightly brushed the side of her cheek with his fingertips. He felt the softness of her skin as she leaned into his touch and turned fully around to face him again. Need buffeted through him. God...the need. He almost

whimpered. The crowds continued to circle around them, but for a split second, it was if they were the only two people there. In a world of two. "That is, I dislike all of it, except you. You're the sweet exception...I need to kiss you...right now," he whispered.

"Let me..."

Tiffany swiftly moved back just as he started to lean over her, ready to take her lips, and then she took another step back to be on the safe side.

"Not here," they said simultaneously in wry tones.

Taking Tiffany's cue, he walked by her side as they passed up Sweden and stopped, instead, in the American area.

They walked through Charles Goodyear's exhibit, a man who'd been hauled off to debtor's prison on any number of occasions for his inability to pay his creditors, only to have his beleaguered family or some other believer in his experiments coughed up the funds to get him released. Late nights with lack of sleep, absentmindedly neglecting his family, and even unmindfully inhaling the very chemicals he worked with for years, were the sacrifices he made on behalf of his numerous, unsuccessful attempts. A gaunt, mild-mannered man both obsessed and driven about his work. This same obsessed man appeared to be comfortably off for his laborious invention of

American vulcanized rubber.

Alexandre's eyes gleamed with interest at America's McCormick reaping machine and replica of one of their new shipping vessels, which stood at least three feet tall. He took it all in before speaking. "Our Great Exhibition has been almost as much talked about in America as it has been here at home. As you can see, they've made a significant number of contributions to this event."

"America." Tiffany nodded in agreement. "They certainly have at that," she remarked, quite impressed. Other machinery, carriages, grains and wines, boots and shoes, and quantities of ore, all dispatched across the ocean to the Exhibition. "My cousin, Anna McEllister, lives in New York," she turned to him and explained, "and has done so for numerous years. Although their manufacturing skill is not able to compete with us, Anna says one day they'll not be far behind."

"I daresay, they'll be up to snuff before we all know it."

"I've visited her several times over the years and we write often. She tells me of all her travel stories. She's quite brave – we're the same age, by the way. I've seen only a few, but she says there are numerous fishing stations along the coasts and some have excellent harbors."

"Yes, I know. I've been to America myself."

"You have? She clasped her hands and gasped

in surprised delight.

"Mmmhmm. On one of their ships, as a matter of fact. Timber is found in abundance there and used in the building of their ships, which are most skillfully designed."

"You'll have to tell me all about your adventure in America one day!"

The clocks—and there were many of them on display—ticked steadily away. Time to think about departing this fairyland. Their little jaunt into the city of London with its myriad sights and sounds would all too soon draw to an end. With no small amount of regret, he knew the time had come to get her back home and at two o'clock he guided them toward the exit. Time passed so quickly. Three hours seemed to fly by.

"It's time to go, Tiffany. I need to get you home."

"Yes, we've dawdled here long enough, I suppose." Clifford was expected back home late this evening. "Besides, in order for a visitor to give every exhibit the attention it deserves would take three hundred hours in the building, not three!"

"No, four hundred hours."

They decided to leave through the south entrance. Any number of hackneys-for-hire would lay waiting to take them in any direction they cared to go...

In the shadows, however, stood a tall man over six foot three inches with mercurial blue eyes pointed fixedly in their direction, his hat sat at an angle and shielded part of his face.

He made not a sound nor incited any ruckus whatsoever.

Grinding his teeth into one clenched band of pearly white, he swiftly made his way back to his gleaming black and burgundy carriage. Wainhaven had a lot of nerve or guts or *something*. He preferred to call it *insanity*. He was a member of the peerage and he knew very well what they were about. Dammit to hell.

His hat in hand, he climbed inside and flung the hat so hard onto the seat it bounced off the burgundy seat cushion and slammed against the floorboards.

"Drive," he ground out to his driver.

Eyes as round as teacup saucers, the driver and footman looked at each other dumbfounded and hurried to do as he bid. They'd never seen their employer in such a tizzy—and they'd been working for the kind, levelheaded man for ages.

* * * *

A few minutes later, they found themselves comfortably ensconced inside a rather large carriage that appeared to look only a few years

old. "To the Euston train station," Alexandre informed the driver, smiling.

No time at all passed when Tiffany heard the streetsellers. Their carts could be seen pulling oversized samples of their wares, from huge hats and umbrellas to a piled-high assortment of cheeses. Their voices mingling with loud shouts advertising everything from Mamba's meat pies to Mrs. Emma's healing powders to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* performance that night to *Crockle's* finest tobacco for sixpence a pound—all could be heard from within the confines of their conveyance. Quite a lively though disjointed staccato of sound.

"Snuff boxes made out of coal. My goodness," she chuckled, in high spirits. She thought her day with Alexandre had turned out splendidly. "What curiosities!"

"Curious or no, you probably noticed not a single water-color or oil painting graced the walls. One of the Commission's rules: paintings are not allowed but other fine art works are."

"Interesting."

The train attendant showed them to their private car and without further ado, she settled in for the return ride that would take them north and then finally by horse, back home.

On the way, a lively recoup of events followed.

"Did you care for any of those large chandeliers, Tiff?"

"Humph. Not a one," she complained in disappointed tones, but then brightened suddenly. "But I did admire the smaller ones, especially the pair of matching candelabra in the English section. Oh, and I loved the beautiful blue shawl from India. It is so vibrant a blue against the snowy white trim, and that emerald, long-sleeved morning gown and matching shoes...oh my...they are quite fabulous, Alex!"

"I must admit, a few of the things we saw today were overdone, practically overloaded with decoration. Quantity does not make for quality," commented the Earl, a thoughtful expression lighting his handsome features. "And some of those carpets, the one with the scarlet reds, yellows, and browns visibly jarred to my eyes, and we won't go into detail about that bed of a thousand colors and hellish ornamentation..." he trailed off. He gave a light shudder of distaste.

"I know. But we did so adore that little rosewood table, though, whose glass-plated top imitates Italian mosaic—and supported by such realistically carved storks, leave shoots, and a flower on either side," opined the Viscountess, chattering away animatedly, her hands in constant motion described the aspects of the article in vivid detail. I'm sure you quite liked the dressing case, made of yew-tree wood from Strudwick's of London, did you not? They make such wonderful

merchandise." She turned to look at him, a smile lighting her face.

"Yes, those particular pieces are well done." He bit back an outright laugh. Such animation! "There are many delightful items on display." Alexandre glanced affectionately at her.

"I'm the proverbial chatterbox today, am I not?" Tiffany chuckled in agreement at his comment. "Quite right, dear philosopher-of-the-arts."

"And your lover-for-all-times," he quickly rejoined, smiling yet serious.

"Yes. A lover for all times."

"No, Tiff...*your* lover for all times."

"Agreed," came her impish reply.

"In silverwork the inferiority of the English to the French is very striking." She considered the matter for only a moment before she shook her head decisively. "Yes, it's the truth. Don't you think?"

"No it isn't. And no, I don't."

"Oh come now. The most beautiful in this class, in fact, is Germany—I think an ornament in silver from a gentleman in Berlin is my absolute favorite. We were also showed up again in woodcarving."

"No we weren't."

"Of course we were! Both the French and Germans showed superiority over the English."

"No they didn't," he continued to argue good-naturedly.

"In lace," he retorted, "the finest specimens of design are the English with Brussels being superior in the delicate look of the fabric."

"Oh pooh! How would you know whether the fabric was delicate or not. Neither of us could touch it. You lose that point, dearest." She shot him a smug smile. "That's settled then."

"I have only one thing to say...*dearest*...in the manufacture of hardware and machinery... the English ruled. Now *that's* settled then." He chuckled. "All in all, the collections are remarkably varied."

"Yes, they really are." She had to agree on that point wholeheartedly. "Some are quite interesting. It's a shame that one cannot outright buy any of the merchandise but make only subtle inquiries—that's if you can find someone available to make inquiries to."

"The purpose of the event was to make it a tantalizing showcase, not a direct marketplace. Hence no price tags, I'm afraid."

"Well, you needn't sound so jovial about it."

"Ah, Tiffany, how can I be anything but jovial when I'm sitting so very, very, *very* close to you...sweet pie..."

"No!" Her cheeks colored at the thoroughly wicked expression on his face. She saw the hungry

glint in his eyes. "It's out of the question." She scooted to the furthest corner of the carriage. Away from him. "This should give you the hint I'm not interested," she said and eyed him with a challenging air. Firmly, she shook her head.

But as far as the Earl of Wainhaven was concerned, her expression said something altogether different and the whirling possibilities of hot sex in a strange carriage lent an unmistakable gleam to her eyes.

"Not here, not now. There's no time."

"Yes here. Most definitely now. Enough time."

"No-no-no-no."

"Oh, sweet pie, yes-yes-yes-yes."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Alexandre watched Clifford and his wife stroll hand-in-hand beyond the fountain of dessert- and punch-laden tables taking up an entire wall on the other side of the room.

He could barely keep his eyes off them.

He could also barely keep his own business affairs in order these days. In point of fact, they'd lapsed rather noticeably so busy had he been in his pursuit of Tiffany. The family's long-time attorney, Thomas Hutchins, had frankly called him to task on his lapse in attention and the far-away look in his eyes on numerous tiresome occasions. No, he'd been too busy keeping tabs on Mrs. Iverson to keep his own business affairs in order.

Thanks to his persistence and money, he knew everything about Clifford's wife. From what she like to eat at breakfast and what she usually wore to bed at night, to how old she'd been when she'd learned to ride her first mare, to her and her

parent's favorite colors.

Every little minute thing.

He had paid dearly for the hushed information imparted to him in bits and pieces on a deserted road at the crack of dusk.

Alexandre looked at the beautiful and expensive combs in her hair sparkling beneath the light of the chandelier. The same ones she'd worn two weeks ago on another engagement, combs he'd bought and personally given to her with a sensual lick across her lips.

Casually. Subtly. He waited. Ticking off the minutes in his head.

The moment Clifford went to fetch Tiffany some punch and a helping of snacks, he immediately got caught up, unfortunately for him, in an unwanted and long-winded conversation with the Dowager Duchess of Portsminth. Clifford was exceedingly popular and was always being waylaid by one person or another. On this bit of trivia, Alexandre could depend. When he saw Lord Tennyson and his wife approach from a different direction and enter into the conversation, he smiled to himself.

Then Alexandre made his move.

He prowled over to Tiffany like some sleek golden tiger. Wordless and wearing only a faint smile, he held out his hand for the current dance, the lively music already in progress. He gave her

little opportunity to refuse him since his hand reached out to touch hers with the casualness of an old friend.

He was far from a friend.

Alexandre felt it instantly. That indefinable 'something' that simmered wherever their bodies touched. His body touched the costly material of her dress as surely as the heat of his body touched her scattering wits. Oh, yes, she knew something existed between the two of them and it wasn't *ever* going away, no matter if she fought it or not.

"You look enchanting. The dress becomes you." The emerald satin gown made of the finest material money could buy was exquisite and fit her flawlessly. "Those combs you're wearing, by the way, are enchanting also, sweet pie," he told her, once they were ensconced on the gigantic ballroom floor sandwiched between seventy other waltzing and talking couples.

"Keep your voice down," she hissed softly without daring to look to her left or right.

"What?" he countered softly back. "What? You don't want everybody to know I bought you the exquisite gown you're wearing, so adoringly cloaking that lean luscious body of yours tonight? Or the diamond combs adorning your hair down to the soft, supple dancing shoes gracing your feet I took much pleasure in purchasing?"

"As a matter of fact, no, I do not!" she retorted.

"If you're trying to get a rise out of me, you're succeeding." A slight flush tinged her cheeks.

His grin was harmless, his eyes, however, glinted with an edgy wildness and the ever-present heat that appeared whenever she was in his arms. "If it's any consolation, Mrs. Iverson, I also take much pleasure...in you."

Tiffany almost choked with her own nerves clogging her throat. She clasped her hand tightly in his lest she falter at his open admission.

She cleared her throat and smiled. "Thank you for the compliment. It is a lovely gown and you have wonderful taste."

Tap. Tap.

"I believe this current dance is mine. The Viscountess saved it for her poor, besotted husband, ol' chap," Clifford said in a friendly tone. Underneath it, Alex alone heard the thread of unalloyed steel in Clifford's cultured tones as he tapped him again on the shoulders. Harder.

Ever conscious of the eyes that might be witnessing their byplay, Alexandre gracefully bowed to Tiffany and let her go with a friendly gesture. Then helplessly, he watched Clifford take her in his arms and waltz off with her, away from him, and into the sea of dancers. Where before his eyes had been alight with heat and devilment, they now shone like iced silver from behind

hooded eyes while he watched her swirled gaily around the dance floor in her husband's arms.

Alexandre knew how important appearances and his reputation were to Clifford. It was quite possibly the only thing keeping the other man at bay and from making a scene. The only thing keeping him from trying to bruise the other side of his jaw, Alex reflected in cold amusement. Yeah, like hell. He could try, but Alexandre would make sure he wasn't an easy or open target the next time.

Next time...he'd do his best to kick his ass.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The next afternoon, Tiffany snuck from the house like a common pilferer in the night as she made her way to Alexandre's cottage, the closest property to her and Clifford's own estate.

Within minutes of the butler announcing her arrival, Alexandre walked briskly in, grabbed her by the hand and gently hulled her up the stairs behind him. He opened the door to the second-floor study room, then closed and immediately locked it. He wanted no intruders during his brief time with Tiffany.

"Tiffany," he breathed her name. "I can't wait — I can never seem to wait when I'm around you. For God's sake, take off your clothes, dear heart. I'm dying to be inside your sweetness."

She took off her gloves, her hat and the rest of her accessories with quick, jerky movements, her hands nearly falling over themselves in her rush to get undressed so she could feel Alexandre's silky skin on her own. He had the most beautiful silky

skin she'd ever seen.

"Hurry, Tiff. Please."

He kissed the backs of her hands while she strove to take off her remaining clothing; alternately he helped and he hindered her. Undoing a button one moment, and grabbing her by the hand to plant kisses on her palm, her shoulder, and moving up to kiss each corner of her lips, in another. He refrained from kissing her fully on the lips though.

"Alex, I can't get undressed if you keep kissing me like this. I feel like I'm missing my thumbs as it is with you so near me."

The minute she fully unclothed, Alexandre lightly brushed the seam of her netherlips several times with the head of his erection. It was all she could do to keep from screaming at the mind-numbing sensations. Her hand closed around him and she pressed him inside her.

"I can't wait either, Alex."

His feet planted firmly on the carpeted floor, he backed her against the nearest corner and slid in and out of her slowly, going deeper each time he moved. When finally embedded deep inside, he stayed there for seconds on end and didn't move, simply enjoying the feel of her all around him. With the exception of the brief, tongued kisses, their secret meetings were the only time that a part of him could literally be inside a part of her. The

feeling...him inside her? Marvelous.

Easing his cock out of her against her vocal, unladylike protests for him not to do so, he placed his head, wet with their moist juices, at the seam of her mouth.

"My cock aches for the feel of your tongue. Taste him."

Tiffany stroked his aching cock with a greedy tongue, whirling and flicking it over his engorged head, before swallowing his length. Placing a suctioning seal around her lips, she began pumping him with her mouth.

"Harder," he ordered thickly. "Tiff, suck it harder."

"Gladly, dear sir."

She sucked harder and his hips pumped into her rapidly back and forth, while his eyes feasted on her suctioning mouth and the occasional look of lust and love she passed his way.

"Keep it up, love, and I'll be coming in your mouth in minutes."

The sharp rap on the door put an immediate halt to his fast-approaching orgasm. "Who is it?" he called out, his tone filled with irritation. He groaned in frustrated annoyance. He'd been minutes away from spilling into his beloved's mouth. Able to come multiple times, that would be just the beginning. Double damn.

"It is I, milord, Varnes."

Tiffany stopped sucking and instead stood on tiptoe to trace his lips with her tongue, her hand moving to caress his jerking cock. Briefly, he stroked her taut clit between his thumb and forefinger, and when she leaned into him and began to rub against his stroking hand, he pushed two fingers inside her and pumped.

"Lord Wainhaven!"

Bloody hell!

"What is it, Varnes?" he called out through the door.

"Lord Rathbern is downstairs in the drawing room wishing to speak to you on a matter of business. Shall I tell him you'll be down in a few moments, milord?"

Shit! "Yes. I'll be but a few moments! Tell him to make himself comfortable with a drink from my liquor cabinet."

"Very good, sir." The servant left as quickly as he came.

"Don't mutter a sound, Tiffany...I'll be back. To you."

Dazed she stared back at him. "But, good grief, my husband stands downstairs not more than a hundred feet separating us and him. If he should find me here—"

"I know that. That's why I want you to be quiet. I'll handle Rathbern." The Earl straightened his attire, smoothed back his golden locks and then

made his way down the steps and to his drawing room.

* * * *

"Do you continue to see my wife, Wainhaven?" It was the first thing out of Clifford's mouth.

Alexandre arched a perfect blonde brow. "Of course...not." He looked down at his desk and began busying himself with the papers on top it. He looked for all the world, unperturbed. "What brings you here, Wainhaven?"

"Look at me, damn you, when I speak to you," Clifford snapped. "I asked you a question."

"Is that a threat I hear in your voice, Viscount?"

"It can be, if you want it to be."

Alexandre's head snapped up and he met his ex-lover and rival's verbal challenge head on. Definitely the wrong thing to do. Despite their overt animosity, remnants of unwanted heat tightened inside his belly, probably the Viscount's too, and then he immediately suppressed it.

"What are you really doing here, Clifford? Is it me you still want?" Alexandre coldly goaded the breathtaking man standing in front of him, a man whose body he knew every inch of. "Are you still sexually attracted to me? Still care about me? Shall I bend you over my desk and drive into you hard and deep like you love it...hmmm, like times

past?"

"No. I bloody well do not," Clifford hissed, though a spark of desire flared in his blue eyes before it disappeared. "I'm in love with my wife."

"I know you're in love with her. And I know," Alex grunted out softly, menacingly, "she's *your* wife. And don't you ever make the mistake of thinking I'm not well aware she fucking belongs to you and not to me."

On one hand, Alexandre wanted to lash out at and kill the man coming between him and the only woman he'd ever wanted, and at the same time, a small part of him wanted to unfasten his own pants and drive himself deep into Cliff's devastatingly talented mouth until he climaxed. Then turn around and do the same thing to him.

He had expected to feel agitation, aggression, but not this residue of arousal that Clifford's nearness apparently still continued to bring. Deliberately turning his back on the man to gather his wayward thoughts, he shuffled through some invitations and correspondence arriving this morning that he hadn't gotten around to opening. They remained unopened because he'd been too busy embedded in Clifford's, no, *his* woman's warm body. *And she is my woman, too.* There was no mistaking that fact.

There would never be any mistaking it.

Tiff had casually eased out to see him early this morning knowing her husband to be busy elsewhere. Clifford was, indeed, a busy man and an early riser, always had been. Alexandre knew everything. He knew when Clifford left the house and where he went, with whom he spoke. He made it his business to know such things. The better to be with Tiffany unfettered and not get caught. It was money well spent. This morning Clifford had been in deep discussion with his long time steward and general man-of-affairs regarding the fencing that needed to be addressed, as well as other business matters. Rather than patching the thirty-mile long fence along the North border of the property, they intended to replace it with sturdier materials much newer in design than the old, worn-out fencing installed years ago.

Alexandre had been busy too.

Clifford immediately sensed what the Earl tried to hide. And he bounded around the desk in two strides, jerking the man around to face him. He gripped him by the arm sleeves. "You're despicable. You've been sniffing around her drawers, haven't you? Haven't you!"

"What do you think?" Alexandre snarled sarcastically, yanking his arms from Clifford's punishing grasp.

"This is what I think—"

Without warning, reacting on pure reflex,

Clifford reared back his fist without restraint and slammed it against the side of Alexandre's face, this time, knocking the other man unconscious instantaneously. Just as Alexandre's head was about to smack the floor, Clifford bent down cushioning the other man's fall. He laid him gently on the floor and stormed out.

* * * *

Tiffany didn't make an audible sound while she waited for Alexandre's return, mentally, however, her mind was a loud beehive of activity. Alexandre was in her blood. A sense of wonderment filled her at the knowledge, and reminiscing about what had transpired between them today, heat suffused her face.

Minutes ticked by with no reappearance of Alex.

Beginning to worry, she hurriedly pulled on her clothes, smoothed her hair back into the same style it had been before ready to walk out the door, when Alexandre opened the bedroom door and snapped it shut.

Aghast, she stared at his purplish face.

The entire left side of his jaw was one big bruise. Near his upper cheek was a small bandage where a little blood had seeped through.

"My God, what happened to you? Did Clifford

do this to you?"

His smile was disarming when he looked at her, until he winched in pain at the slight movement it caused to his jaw. He gave her a rueful look.

"Well, I did say I would take care of him, I just didn't say how."

"From the looks of things I'd say he took care of *you!*" she exclaimed, not in the least amused. "You look dreadful." She looked around the room to see if there might be anything appropriate she could use to put on his face.

"I'll mend," he shrugged, unconcerned. "He's gone." His expression turned boyish. "So don't you think that my suffering deserves a little tender loving care?"

"What you deserve is for me to walk out that door and be done with you or perhaps, hit you on the other side of your jaw."

"Never say that. My, you're so heartless," he admonished. "You know you don't mean it." He held out his arms and beckoned her to him.

Without hesitation, she moved toward him, grumbling all the way. "I should call you both out and have done with you both!"

"You would duel with us, I see." He chuckled at her sharp words, enfolding her in the warm circle of his arms. His chin resting lightly on the top of her head, he inhaled a deep breath.

She was right where she belonged. In the circle of his arms.

* * * *

Alexandre sent a note before the break of dawn requesting that it be slipped to Tiffany's lady's maid directly and without further ado. In the note, it simply said:

Dearest Love:

I Need to see you. I. Need. You.

Come to me at dawn's first light tomorrow at the gazebo.

W.

Tiffany stared a long time at the letter, a few hours later, written in Alexandre's scrawling, masculine handwriting. She traced over the words 'need' that had been underlined twice for emphasis. Then she crumpled the missive and the envelope into a tight wad in her hand, as if doing so could crumple away her deep-seated feelings for Alex, and hurled them into the fire.

A look of resolution and sadness supplanted any happier expression she had worn moments before its receipt. Her husband loved her, truly loved her, and she loved him. Yet she loved Alex too. Enormously. *It's quite the wrench how much in*

love with the Earl I truly am, she confessed under her breath in consternation.

Nonetheless, Tiffany did not show up the next morning.

* * * *

Earl Wainhaven waited for her at the appointed time and place in a beautiful, private area of his forty-five thousand acre estate complete with gazebo, a mass of wildflowers, and a running brook gurgling with clear fresh water his Tiffany enthused over several times before. When he realized she didn't intend to show, his decision was swift and impulsive.

"It's time, then, to go to her..."

Alexandre seemed to materialize out of the dining room's woodwork.

"Good morning, Tiff." He smiled, but it didn't quite reach his cool gray eyes. His furious gray eyes. "What? No 'good morning' in return for the love of your life?"

* * * *

Tiffany grew uneasy. Instinct warned her the time had come to immediately leave the table and everything she had on it.

Too late.

He pulled her forward and his mouth claimed hers in a ravishing kiss.

Molten heat pooled in Tiffany's body. She trembled, growing dazed. She made a sound, but it was raw and only partially a protest. "No, Alex."

Unsmiling, he tore his mouth from hers, his eyes glazed with passion. "If you intended to thwart me by not coming to me early this morning," he said quietly, "then you've failed miserably."

"I thought it best, Alex."

"I thought it best, Alex," he mimicked. "You thought it best? Well, I don't think it's best. Don't talk to me about what's *best* when no woman interests me, no matter her beauty, her music skills, her titillating conversation or her reputed skills in the bedroom. No woman has *ever* interested me in a sexual way," he hesitated for the space of a sigh. "No woman ever will but you."

"Stop it this instant!"

She tried to keep her voice from rising in agitation. "This has to cease. Things are getting out of hand," she admitted more calmly, "and I have no intention of continuing this clandestine romance." *What if they were caught by one of the peerage one day in one of their flagrant embraces? By the servants? Worse still, what if her now enamored*

husband found out about them from someone else? She trembled at the thought. Handsome, sophisticated, and known to be even-keeled and slow to truly anger, he nonetheless had the temper of a mighty gale wind when it did show itself. Where she was concerned, he seemed to be one fierce bundle of windy temperament. No, no, she needed to call a halt to any future intimacy or secret meetings between them right this very second.

Was she simply uttering empty words? Lying to herself about never seeing Alexandre again? Deep down she knew they were empty words. Regrettably, so did he, for he knew the fire between them could not be doused out or forgotten. Still, she had to try.

"It has to stop, Alex. Tell me you will stop."

"I can't do that," he replied in a muffled voice, his nose and mouth brushing back and forth against the crook of her neck. "I can't. I need to be with you, inside you, or I'll go mad."

"Alex...no."

"Tell me to go, Tiffany, and I will." Alexandre whispered the words against the nape of her neck. "And if you believe that, you're a foolish woman." He took both her hands in his and placed them around his washboard waistline.

"I've already told you to go, you've paid little heed."

"Dance with me, your body close to mine in a

way that it can never be in public." He overflowed with desire for this woman; it flowed through the words he murmured in her ear; and it flowed while they softly swirled around to imaginary music in the softly lit room and the kaleidoscope of colors of dawn's passing outside.

She knew she should tell him to go and really mean it, but somehow, she could not.

"I'm not a foolish woman. Stay," she whispered. Her entreaty filled the silence of the room, sealing their fates. She moaned his name again, so softly this time, surrendering to the madness and the desperation growing inside him.

He pulled up her dress, without bothering to take it off her body, and undid the fastening of his pants. Neither did he bother with taking off his pants. This would have to be very quick and sweet. Positioning himself against the wall, he lifted her as if she weighed nothing. Nothing at all. Then he eased her down onto his rock hard shaft until she touched his very base. Down to the hilt of him. If he could've gotten his balls inside her too, he would have gladly done so.

"Lord," he muttered thickly. "You feel marvelous."

He sucked at her mouth and began moving deep inside her.

"Please, Alexandre."

"Please, what?" His voice was a hoarse growl.

"Please..."

"Do you need something, Tiff? What do you need? Hmmm...what?"

He pumped once into her hard. "Do you know how much I've wanted to do this to you? Thought about it for hours on end last night while you were in bed with your husband probably riding him senseless."

"I could think of nothing but us after receiving your note. Daydreamed about having you inside me, but I—I."

"This is not a daydream. Not," he kissed her closed eyelids, went lower to touch her chin, "anymore. Now it's for real."

"No, don't move, Alex. I want to do all the work. While you stand there holding me up, simply taking it." She grabbed him by the shoulders to gain purchase and began pumping up and down on him, at first with soft and light strokes. "Take it like you've commanded me to take it before," she ordered in a throaty voice. The hold on her restraint didn't last long. In minutes, she began to move up and down on him like a woman from the wild. Her eyes fluttered closed as she found her frantic rhythm. "Such pleasure you give me."

Alex stood completely still, watching her face, her expression while she clutched his shaft with her cunt, working them both into a spiraling

frenzy.

"Open your eyes, Tiffany," he commanded hoarsely. "I—I want to see your eyes, want you to watch me as I'm watching you shatter in my arms. Open them and look at me and only me."

She mouthed something indecipherable to him and slowly opened her eyes and focused on him.

"Tell me what you just said," his voice urgent, catching. "Repeat it to me. I need to hear you say it."

"Alex, I love you so much."

"Yes! A million times, yes." His lips scored each turgid nipple, plucking them with his mouth. "And I, you. Every time I look into your eyes, *I see it*. Every time I'm embedded so deep in you I can touch your womb, *I know it*."

"Know it, Alex."

Their eyes locked on each other and their mouths tightened to hold back the shout wanting to spill forth. At once Alex began to move, deep and hard. He'd disobeyed her but couldn't help himself. In seconds they were crying out softly as something indefinable rushed over them a split second before they climaxed together.

Wetness bathed them down below while faint points of light, like twinkling stars, hovered slightly above them. Expanding and enclosing them, and then in a blink they were gone. Their eyes wide open, they couldn't fail to notice the

strange almost invisible illumination.

A myriad of emotions chased over Alexandre's beautiful features. "Yes. I understand. It's so simple, really," he whispered. "This is how we are together, how we will always be together...other half to my soul. I will love you, Tiffany, to the end of days and I would rather die than give you up."

His head swooped down and met hers in a brief earth-shattering kiss before he quietly slipped away with the rays of the morning's light.

* * * *

Fate lent truth to those heartfelt words a very short time later.

Clifford's Thai-trained right foot laid waiting in siege as an unpleasant surprise for him the second he stepped out of his carriage.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Viscount's eyes narrowed on her. "You've been sleeping with the Earl," he stated baldly out of the blue. "Haven't you?"

Shocked at his blunt statement, she could only nod truthfully, her wary expression telling him she already knew what would come next.

"How many?" His voice was hoarse. "How many more times has this been going on? You meeting him, him meeting you? You're mired in nothing but one little rendezvous after another. Aren't you? It's a wonder you can find the stamina to do anything else to me or see to the duties of running our household."

"How many times?"

She started to speak, but nothing came out. Instead, an angry flush crept up her cheeks.

"No answer. That many times, eh?" His hands tightened on the reins of his trotting horses, his knuckles turning white from the tension.

She simply stood there looking at a point over

his shoulder, too guilty or too afraid to look him in the eye. She remained mute, her chin turned in a defiant angle.

"Tell me right now, Tiffany, or I swear I'll march over there and ask him myself."

"Stop it! How many times did *you* make love to him? How many times did you leave this house for *your* little rendezvous with him?" she sputtered, thinking that an offense the best defense.

"I wasn't in love with you at that time," he justified, before becoming deadly calm, "but now I am."

"And you think that should make a difference to me?"

"It makes all the difference in the world," he assured her in no uncertain terms, "to me."

"Well, well. I suppose I should fall in with your wishes now that you claim to love me so much?" The derision in her voice lanced like a knife.

"You had damn well better. While you're out playing naked charades with Alexandre, I'm missing out. I should be getting all of what you're giving to him. *Wife*."

The look he hurled at her was lethal.

He steered the team of horses around the next bend, staring at the road ahead as if it held all the answers to the chaotic questions racking through his mind.

The bright yellow of the sun dipped below a thick copse of tall elm and oak trees, casting dim shadows that lengthened into the immediate surroundings ahead of them. He paid no heed to the sun or the shadows—he would get no answers from either. His mind focused on one thing alone, Tiffany.

She glanced away. “You can’t miss what I give you freely nearly everyday.”

“Well, I damn well do miss it!” He felt as frustrated as she looked. He could feel her eyes on him, trying to determine what he was thinking.

“How does it feel to be on the receiving end of a spouse’s sexual liaison, Mr. Iverson?”

“Who the hell do you think you’re talking to? Don’t you dare patronize me. I’m not liable for my actions if you continue to do so,” he threatened. “Christ. Do you truly love me at all, even a little?”

“I do.” She hesitated for only the space of a second, wanting him to understand her feelings for him and for Alex, yet afraid if he did. “Clifford, I do love you. Much more than a little.”

Those few sincere words had an immediate, calming effect. His anger left as suddenly as it surfaced, leaving behind a feeling of wretchedness in its wake.

“I don’t believe you.”

Without a thought to where they were, he pulled the horses to a stop and steered the carriage

onto the side of the dirt road. "Prove it. Right now."

With a great deal of zest and agility, Tiffany Iverson set about trying to do just that. He didn't make it easy, for he became an extremely demanding lover.

* * * *

"Dammit." Clifford chose a few other choice curse words when he smudged both his handiwork and his fingers with black ink for the third time in a row early afternoon the following day. He laid the palm of his hand across his forehead and blew out a flustered breath. Perhaps he should give it a rest, he decided.

He put paper markers inside his various ledger books and scientific journals as placeholders before closing them shut altogether with a decisive click. His mind was all over the place today. First he occupied himself with scientific theory, then switched to business affairs, and finally to the estate's personal finances.

What did it matter? How could he get any real work done when she continually crept up in his mind? He felt so close to the edge...so close...how soon before one false move catapulted him over it. He adored Tiffany. Wasn't that enough for her!

Deep in contemplation, he looked outside the

window of his office, his fingers moving across his lips. Then he wondered if she'd ever done the same thing because of him. His thoughts immediately refocused when he spotted one of Tiffany's personal carriages, and prancing team of four she often used whenever traveling out and about, rounded the corner on his left.

Bonnet set at a jaunty angle, she stood on the top step looking for all intents and purposes as if she was about to leave. *Not bloody likely*, he reasoned suspiciously, *not until he had a few honest answers. Like where did she intend on going? To one of her lady friend's homes, or to Alexandre's?*

He moved in rapid strides, his tall legs eating up the tiled floor underneath his feet.

"It looks as if you're about to leave. So am I," he lied glibly. "Let me take you where you want to go."

"Oh really, darling, there's no need." She stood on the step, her reticule in one hand. Her other hand tight on the curved railing. "I've just had the carriage brought around, you see—I wouldn't want to trouble you, when I know how very busy you are today." She fidgeted nervously with her bonnet, then her reticule. "You mentioned yesterday that you'd be tied up with your scientific papers ..." Her voice trailed away at the utter stillness of his stance as if he waited for the perfect timing to pounce. Not in a good way

either.

"Why it's no trouble at all to see my wife where she wants to go. By the way, where are you going?"

"I—I was going to visit the Duchess of Wenfield," she responded on a breathless note. "I received an informal invitation to play cards—a game of whist—for a couple of hours."

"How convenient." His voice remained neutral but firm. "I'm going in that direction myself. I will take you."

She was lying, he fumed, and he knew she lied. He'd seen no such invitation from the Duchess of Wenfield. When he first married her, he hadn't cared what she did, now it seemed, everything she did became of utmost importance. *If she thinks I don't know about their recent little excursion to the Great Exhibition, she can think again.* He made it his business to know what transpired in his house at all times, including the invitations coming into it. His servants respected and were loyal to him, not only for his fair but firm treatment, but also his integrity. Before the afternoon was over, so would his wife.

"But, I—"

"No buts, dear wife. I simply insist," he countered, giving her a smile that did nothing to erase the stark chill in his blue eyes. "I will take you where you want to go." He enunciated every

word slowly as if he were talking to an imbecile.

"Of course." She gave him a weak smile of acquiescence.

Twenty minutes later, sitting in an entirely different carriage, the Viscount at the reins, they set off at a brisk pace to the Duchess' home—one of several—this one located on the outskirts of Cheltenham.

He gave her a mild look before returning his gaze on the path ahead of him. "I've never seen Alexandre act like this—not over any man and certainly not over any woman," he stated conversationally. "He would rather get himself killed then stay out from under your skirts. He's deeply in love with you, you know."

Her voice was whisper soft and sad. "Yes, I know."

Afraid to speak for fear his voice would crack, he shook his head as if to clear it. He closed his eyes as the pain of her acknowledgement and her own unspoken words hit him like sharp spikes biting into his skin. "You're in love with him too, aren't you?"

She gave a poignant smile. "Why would it matter?" she asked softly.

His back rim-rod straight, he faced her, hands gripping the reigns so tight they dug into his skin. "You tell me," he rasped in a harsh voice, his heart breaking in fragments.

"Yes. I love him."

"How much do you love him? The truth. Please. How much?"

She swallowed. Hard. "I'm very much in—in lo—love with him. It's indescribable this feeling between us."

"What of me? Do you really love me at all, Tiffany? Or has it been mere pity that you've felt for me all this time?"

"Don't ever say such a statement. If you never know anything else in your lifetime, know this one thing, Clifford Iverson! Pity is an emotion I've never applied to you. I've felt anger, desire, respect, and sizzling passion for you. Never pity. Not once."

She touched his arm in a caress. The look in her eyes provided proof of her sincerity. "Cliff, I love you too. I've had a mad crush on you for years. That will not change. Not ever in this lifetime."

"No," he shook his head again and sharply exhaled. "What's changed is your infinite feelings for Alexandre."

"What's also changed is that I now have a crush on a man I love and who now loves me back in return—that man is my husband."

He stared at her wordlessly, his eyes piercing hers. His face a cold and shuttered mask, he made no comment at all to her words. Then on that awkward note, he flicked the reins with a brusque

tug and the horses, seeming to understand its owner's presence of mind, trotted quickly on down the road.

* * * *

Sleep proved a long time coming that night—the same way it'd been for the past several nights already. The lengthy bath, the nightcap of brandy from his flask, the promise of answers in the morning—none of these worked to sooth his tense nerves or frantic thoughts.

This night proved no exception.

Eyes wide open he lay in a bed at the opposite end of the long hallway separated from his wife. He'd chosen not to sleep beside her tonight. He couldn't. Not tonight. Not in seven long, gut-wrenching days or nights. Hands behind his head, he stared blindly at the ceiling.

Finally, some time later after much tossing, turning, and tremendous and honest soul-searching, he surrendered blessedly to slumber. Blessedly peaceful slumber.

He slept knowing his fate and accepting what it held in store for him. For the first time, he accepted all of it.

For the first time, he welcomed it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Clifford noiselessly opened the door to his bedchamber the next evening, one he shared with his wife, that is, until a week ago...ever since *the carriage ride*. It wouldn't have mattered even if he'd made any noise or not. So wrapped up into each other were his wife and past lover, they never noticed him standing there.

So, this is how it felt to be a voyeur, he thought, wryly.

Alexandre and Tiffany lay spooned together on a bed that had been in his family's home for centuries while his ex-lover and rival pumped wildly, in an almost uncontainable fashion, into his wife's sopping wet pussy. Even from this distance, he could hear the wetness between her thighs. Their groans became fiercer with each passing thrust and counter-thrust. He continued to watch as somehow, the other man managed to stop just shy of them exploding together in climax...

"I'm obsessed with you, Tiffany. Every inch of your skin...born for my touch. The mate to my soul, and I—I can't give you up. I can't. I—"

"I know. Every time you look at me, every time you touch me, in the way you touch me, I know."

Alexandre's movements became much slower. His eyes closed in unimaginable bliss, he softly called out her name over and over, telling her how much he loved her and couldn't be separated from her. He kissed and laved the side of her neck, her shoulder, her hair, any part of her he could get to as if he'd love to do nothing more than lick her into himself for all eternity.

Tiffany's eyes shut as tightly as Alexandre's. A look of rapture spread across her features. Tears trickled down her cheeks, "Can't get enough of touching you, being with you either." She began to cry in earnest, the sound of her soft sobs renting the air they breathed. "Want you."

"Don't cry. Please, sweetheart, don't cry. Nothing can destroy this. Nothing. Want to love you, make love to you all the days of my life...*Marry me.*"

He started moving inside her with gradual but increasing speed. His voice, when he spoke, was hoarse from the harsh, muffled noises that continuously tore through his throat from the second he'd touched her body. His voice faded away, only to have another shutter rack clean

through him. Such sweet, extreme pleasure. "I never understood why no other woman ever interested me. Now I do. It was because of you. I've been waiting for you and hadn't known it. You and Clifford will always be mine. Forever." He drew back and plunged into Tiffany's dripping wet flesh, the sound a deliciously loud pop to both their ears.

"Yes. We will be," she agreed, her voice ragged with passion. "I love hearing this wet suctioning sound, Alex. Passionate lovers for hours. Want to hear it in every opening I possess, *all the days of my life.*"

"And you will, sweetheart. You will." Alex bit back something else he was about to say as another burst of pleasure surged throughout his entire body. "I love you above all that breathes." He bowed backwards, another shutter hitting him deep and hard, and he stiffened tight as a bowstring. "Ahhh, Jesus. Oh my—"

Tiffany's face dropped back against the soft feather pillow as Alex pressed almost brutally against her back, their bodies slick with their sweat, as though he were trying to climb into her skin. A body in pure relentless motion draped over her.

"Marry me, Tiff, with the moonlight as our witness..."

In a darkened corner not far from the door,

Clifford sank in a soundless heap onto the carpet, his eyes never straying from the scorching scene playing out in vivid detail before him. Like a black cloak, the room's darkness settled around the equally dark color of his evening attire. They could not see him even if they hadn't been so busy going at it with each other. Alex was indeed consuming Tiffany.

Desire unchecked smoldered in Clifford from the inside out. When he touched himself, he leaked pre-cum all over the place, his erection hard as granite. Instead of being turned off or afraid or furious, like any normal husband would be, oddly enough, he was incredibly aroused...on fire for the two people in his bed. His whole body blazed with heat.

He drew out his swollen penis and began to massage it back and forth. Liquid spilled from the slit on his cockhead. He tasted his own liquid in a single swipe of his finger the way he'd seen Tiffany and Alex do to him on countless occasions. The liquid continued to spill forth like a boundless stream, and he uttered a silent moan in his mind. Again, he tasted himself, his eyes on the two grunting lovers. Then taking hitched, uneven breaths of his own, he took the oozing liquid and rubbed his cock with it to the exact movements of the pair on the bed.

The harder they thrust, the harder he thrust.

He wanted badly to close his eyes to the intense pleasure he derived from this experience—his very first—but forced himself to keep his eyes wide open. He didn't want to miss a single thing that happened between his beloved wife and the only male lover he knew he would ever have in this lifetime. He rocked his hands back and forth, then up and over his sizeable erection, massaging his balls, and then grunted a whisper-soft moan as he squeezed his base to keep from coming until they did.

Exquisite sensations rushed through him at being a voyeur to their lovemaking. He only wished he'd gotten here sooner, then he could have masturbated multiple times without them being any the wiser. Him, Tiffany, and Alexandre. No longer angry, obsessive yes, possessive yes, he would willingly share her with Alex and only with Alex. *This is the way it's meant to be*, he realized. Ménage a trois for the rest of their lives.

What Clifford saw next made him gush out his seed in one of the most forceful, uncontrollable orgasms he'd ever experienced. Load after load of cum coated his hand as he fought to keep quiet so they wouldn't hear.

Their lovemaking became so intense and frenetic a soft, nearly invisible, white swirling glow seemed to emanate around their melded bodies. The glow grew brighter and brighter with

each second that passed. When they finally reached the pinnacle of their fulfillment, the glow burst into tiny dots of light, like falling stars, floating over the couple, their shouts of ecstasy muffled so no one would hear.

So Clifford would never hear.

But the room shouted the heady scent of their natural body scent, their sweat and the sweet smell of their release. Life-entwining fluids saturated the sheets as though they had been at it for hours and hadn't been able to stop, not for a single moment. And Clifford...Clifford had never seen such thing in all his life. It had been pure magic. So in tuned with one another they'd never been aware that that he witnessed their loving.

The tiny dots of light unerringly made their way to the darkened corner of the room where Clifford sat, bathing him in the warmth of the waning light. "Forgive me," he said to the two occupants in the bed, wanting acceptance, needing it desperately at that moment. "Forgive me."

* * * *

Both Alexandre and Tiffany turned their heads in the direction of the masculine voice coming from across the room and saw Clifford sitting on the floor, his eyes deeply glazed in passion, his sodden flesh still pulsating and hard.

"There is little to forgive." Not bothering to hide her flushed nakedness, she rose to a sitting position and focused her attention on the only other man alive who could make her heart race. "Please, I need you both inside me at the same time. Sandwich me between you. The two loves of my life, one between my legs, the other, between my ass cheeks," Tiffany begged in amazing and renewed longing once more. She beckoned to her husband.

"Come, Clifford. Be with us." Alexandre beckoned as well.

In ten quick strides, Clifford, his clothes practically torn off his body by his own impatient hands, stood naked by the bed staring at them. Alex reached over and yanked him down, kissing him with passionate fervor. "Can you taste our beloved on my lips, Clifford? She tastes delicious, does she not?"

"God, yes."

Though he spoke to Alex, his gaze focused unblinkingly on his wife. He could deny it no longer, lie to himself no longer. The facts were irrefutable. Tiffany and Alexandre belonged together, and he belonged with them. He'd been deeply afraid of losing Tiffany completely to Alexandre. He realized now what he really wanted was not to lose her, but to be with her forever, and *him*, as clandestine and improper as

that might inwardly seem. He could have it all if he just reached out to them—or lose everything if he did not. No more lies to himself and no more holding back. *Ever*.

“Let’s give her what she’s aching for and more, shall we Alex?” Desperate to be inside her, he laid down on the huge bed, placed his wife on top of him and on a guttural growl, lunged deep inside her sheath.

“Hell yes.” Alex immediately positioned himself at her soaking rear entrance. “Sinking into the two of you is a dream I will never tire of.”

* * * *

Clifford rose four weeks later in glorious, unashamed nakedness from the huge poster bed, at the DuPraden Hall estate, the three of them often slept in it together whenever they weren’t sleeping at one or another of their respective residences. It meant they traveled to and fro on a regular basis. They were nearly inseparable.

He stared out Alexandre’s window at the moonlit sky and knew in clear detail what his future held. It made him smile. Whenever he made love with them, he would *always* come harder, scream louder, take flight higher and glide down slower. There would forever be sheer magic between Tiffany and Alexandre. Their embrace

burned so hotly it could light a thousand candles, and he wanted constantly to be a part of it. A part of them. He loved them both, adored Tiffany beyond reason, and any children born of their mutual relationship would be acknowledged and loved by all three. Such sweet, sweet rapture, this ménage.

At the rate they made love, he seriously doubted his wife of six months would remain childless for long. The three of them made love almost constantly, sometimes to the exclusion of everything else, it seemed. God, but it felt so very good each and every time they went at it. A shiver of pure sexual obsession and joy ran down his spine at the memories of the past, and the ones they would surely make. He turned from the window and stared at the two sleeping forms cuddled close.

"We're no longer asleep. Come back to bed with us, Clifford, it is always warmer when you're in it."

"We love you too," Alexandre added in a gentle, sexy tone. "Besides, we have this sudden aching need to be all over you, all inside you again."

"Exactly," Tiffany piped in suggestively, meaning every word of it, her legs already spreading wide in restless invitation. Alexandre and Tiffany each raised a hand in supplication for

Clifford to join them, and he gladly held out his hands and took each one.

EPILOGUE

February 2, 1852

Two months later

Lady Tiffany, sitting resplendent in her short-sleeved rose and cream gown embroidered almost identical to the one she'd seen at the Great Exhibition, smiled at the ladies who'd attended her lavish afternoon tea on this brisk, chilly day.

Quite the success, Tiffany thought with satisfaction, and looked around the room at the three dozen or more women who'd shown up. All were the cream of society, and she beamed in delight at her first big tea party of the winter. She only occasionally entertained. Preferred instead, the glorious solitude of her surroundings, her two loves, and a few good friends, to that of the habitually large social gatherings society still gave though the height of the Season had long come and gone. A new Season would begin in another few months.

"I see marriage to that devilishly handsome Lord Rathbern agrees with you, my dear," Lady Charlotte smiled. "You look splendid. You must give me the name of your new modiste."

"Love radiates from you," another woman about nineteen years of age spoke up. "Love and happiness. I only hope one day I might find a gentleman who is as obviously besotted with me as Lord Rathbern is with you."

"You do look so happy and content," Lady Felicity agreed. She smiled at her friend and then patted her hand. "I have to agree, you fairly bloom."

Each of the ladies present, however, couldn't help but glance subtly at Tiffany's left hand a time or two. Tiffany intercepted the look of ill-disguised curiosity on one of the younger lady's faces and smiled into her porcelain teacup.

None of the women could quite understand why the Viscountess wore double wedding bands, both a beautiful lustrous gold but of a distinctly different design, on her dainty left ring finger...

TO BE CONTINUED, PLEASE STAY TUNED

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Married over eight years to a logistics sergeant in the Ohio National Guard. Received dual Associate's Degrees in Data Processing & Business Mgmt from Cuyahoga Community College and a Bachelor's Degree in Business & Office Administration from Cleveland State University. Retired early due to disability. During the winter months, December-January, I happily defect to central Florida with a several good books in tow. Love to travel to new and old places. I'm also considered a bonafide "coupon queen" for my diligent and often amusing determination to use coupons every chance I get.

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